
Article

Decolonising development practice pedagogy: ways forward and persistent challenges in the synchronous online classroom

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Abstract

Although decolonisation is a pressing goal for many front-line instructors, there are few pedagogical resources for how to do this in the online environment. This article provides a set of strategic approaches that can help combat dominant power dynamics in the classroom and open opportunities for transformative learning. The research draws on instructor focus groups and student surveys from the synchronous, online Master of Development Practice programme at Regis University, USA. Six pedagogical approaches are described in light of their successes and remaining challenges: building community, learning from each other and co-creating knowledge, opening spaces for participation, de-centring Western voices and epistemologies, focusing on the critical thinking, reflection and action cycle and creating connection in virtual spaces.

Keywords synchronous online learning; pedagogy; development studies; power dynamics; multicultural education; decolonisation; higher education

Introduction

The push to decolonise universities across the Global North, long marginalised to certain disciplines or locations, has recently enjoyed renewed attention (Mbembe, 2016; Bhambra et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2018). This movement is driven by a desire to form students who can engage in our diverse and global world, and by critical reflections on how the dominant curriculum, knowledge transmission and relationships in the academy continue to reproduce colonial power dynamics (Andreotti, 2010; Langdon, 2013). Student-led movements, from the Rhodes Must Fall campaign at the University of Oxford (inspired by the movement's namesake in South Africa) to Georgetown University's attempts to recognise and atone for its past ties with slavery, and more recent Black Lives Matter demands, have forced universities around the world to reckon with their colonial legacies and the lack of diversity in their student body, instructors and curriculum (Bhambra et al., 2018).

Decolonisation is the effort to dismantle 'dominant hegemony, hierarchies, and concentrations of power and control' related to geopolitics, race, class, gender or other identities (Gorski, 2008: 515). Most universities are orientated around Western knowledge systems, silencing a wide variety of ways of knowing and understanding the world (Hall and Tandon, 2017). As educators warn, decolonisation is not a straightforward process, and when it is done in a superficial or ad hoc way, it can end up reinforcing dominant power dynamics (Gorski, 2008; Alasuutari, 2010; Langdon, 2013). In this article, I analyse different pedagogical strategies for decolonising a synchronous online development studies classroom. Development as a discipline is particularly implicated in (neo)colonialism, and it can reinforce persistent power dynamics, depending on the curriculum and how it is taught (Langdon, 2013; Sultana, 2019). Although there are strong imperatives to decolonise development studies, there is a dearth of research on how to actually do this, especially online (Rye, 2014; Spiegel et al., 2017). Post-colonial and critical development scholars (Mohanty, 1988; Escobar, 1995; Spivak, 2003; Kapoor, 2004) are known for their dense, critical and theoretical writing, which often fails to provide practical direction in the field or classroom. This article aims to contribute useful approaches to online learning programmes, with a particular relevance for development studies.

The Master of Development Practice (MDP) programme at Regis University in Denver, Colorado, USA, started in 2016. It has been deliberately designed to avoid the colonial power dynamics that exist in most development studies programmes and thereby produce more effective practitioners. As a White female academic, I have tried to follow the advice of Indigenous scholar Pete (2018), who argues that decolonising the university should not be left to already over-taxed Indigenous and minority instructors; it is the work of all instructors. In this effort, my colleagues and I have struggled through the personal reflection, new learning, fear and tremendous responsibility that often prevents White instructors from undertaking this type of work (Last, 2018; Pete, 2018).

The MDP programme uses a video-conferenced, synchronous classroom to bring students in the physical classroom in Denver into conversation and deep learning with students around the world. The programme's vision is to have an international student body, fully engaged with each other and the best that academia and contemporary practice have to offer. We prepare students to be leaders who facilitate holistic development solutions, taking on the world's most pressing development challenges, from homelessness in Denver to water scarcity in Ouagadougou. For us, development is something that happens locally as well as globally; within our classroom, we see the global and the local being mutually constituted (Massey, 2005). Students from more than twenty countries are enrolled in the programme, and most of them are full-time development practitioners working on social justice issues in their home countries.

Literature review

Decolonising education

Educational research, curriculum, pedagogies and exclusive systems of access reflect the norms, assumptions and biases of White, Euro-American, middle- and upper-class males (Mbembe, 2016;

hooks, 2010). Historically, gaining access to formal education for Native populations, whether in West Africa or the US, was accompanied by cultural trauma. Students were forced to abandon and condemn their own languages, knowledges and customs to assimilate to the dominant colonial culture in order to survive and succeed (Reyhner and Eder, 2015). Many Northern universities were also founded on the dispossession of Indigenous people and built with slave labour and/or colonial riches. In the US, 'education was structured to reinforce white supremacy, teaching white children ideologies of dominance and black children ideologies of subordination' (hooks, 2010: 23). These ideologies were internalised by colonised populations, who came to believe in the superiority of whiteness and maleness (hooks, 2010). Today, education around the world continues to be starkly segregated by race and class (and sometimes gender).

At its core, the education system reinforces dominant power dynamics by denying that every learner enters the classroom with a unique history, culture, identity and politics, which not only affect the way they see the world, but also the way they learn. When international students are admitted to higher education programmes in the US, they face many particular challenges trying to adapt to a different learning environment. Beyond the linguistic challenges for second- (or third- or fourth-)language speakers, these students may come from pedagogical cultures and sociocultural norms that are very different from those of US institutions, leading to anxiety around participating in class and difficulties meeting expectations (Gu et al., 2010). Students from marginalised communities in the US often face similar challenges (White, 2011).

Decolonising the classroom involves paying attention to power as it manifests in personal histories and identities, course curriculum, pedagogies and interpersonal dynamics. Students should be encouraged to reflect on their own knowledge and values, and the assumptions that they have considered right and normal (Alasuutari, 2010; Andreotti, 2010). A decolonising pedagogy shifts how knowledge is generated and what ways of knowing are valued in the classroom. It involves actively struggling against dominant narratives and voices, and creating space for subaltern and marginalised knowledges from the Global South, Indigenous groups and people excluded by virtue of their race, class, gender, sexual orientation and other social factors. Writing to the African context, Kenyan scholar Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986: 87) defines decolonisation as re-centring African consciousness, language and cultural heritage, as part of a larger search for a 'liberating perspective' that can allow us 'to see ourselves clearly in relationship to ourselves and to other selves in the universe'. Decolonisation begins with a process of self-reflection, but critically transforms into a sociopolitical process that pushes real-world action (Tuck and Yang, 2012).

Decolonising development studies

Concerns about perpetuating inequality in education are amplified in development studies programmes, where students are often directly engaging in low-income communities that are not their own. The field struggles with a colonial legacy of Western experts deciding what the rest of the world needs, often with disastrous effects (Escobar, 1995; Sylvester, 1999). Current theories and practices around development education are primarily created in the West and continue to frame development in the (colonial) terms of modernisation, technology and rationality. As Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2013: 66) argues, 'The globalization of knowledge and Western culture constantly reaffirms the West's view of itself as the centre of legitimate knowledge and the arbiter of what counts as knowledge and the source of "civilized" knowledge.'

The majority of the best-funded and highly ranked development studies programmes are in the US and Europe, where, predominantly, privileged students learn about poverty and 'The Other'. As post-colonial development scholars contend, 'The Other', whether it be the 'mysterious Arab' (Said, 1979), a 'Third World Woman' (Mohanty, 1988) or the 'primitive Native' (Smith, 2013), is presented in popular culture as well as academia as deficient and backwards compared to the ideal of the Euro-American male. Said (1979) explains that knowledge of distant places and cultures has been legitimised through European lenses, without giving 'The Other' any chance to narrate their own story. Post-colonial feminist

scholar Tyagi (2014: 45) identifies ‘the task of a postcolonial educator/scholar [as] insert[ing] the often “absent” colonized subject ... into the dominant discourse in a way that it resists/subverts the authority of the colonizer’.

When relatively privileged students from high-income countries learn about the poverty in distant places, they may feel sad, guilty, lucky, sympathetic or beneficent (Barraclough and McMahon, 2013; Brown, 2015) – emotions that reinforce the us–them dichotomy, rather than a recognition of interconnectedness (Andreotti, 2014). As Langdon (2013: 385) puts it, decolonisation ‘must be understood as something we are all implicated in and ultimately responsible for, rather than an impetus to help or save’. In classrooms with little diversity, students of colour and/or international students often feel isolated or like tokenistic representatives of their group, and their experiences are not integrated in the curriculum in a way that could transform learning (Terenzini et al., 2001).

A small but growing number of scholars have argued for the need to challenge the supremacy and universality of Western ideas of progress and development in education (Alasuutari, 2010; Andreotti, 2010; Langdon, 2013; Hall and Tandon, 2017; Sultana, 2019; Cornwall, 2020). Among the recommendations offered by these scholars are to struggle against dominant narratives, theories and voices, make explicit the ties between colonialism and current development practice, prioritise the epistemologies of thinkers from the Global South and Indigenous communities, adopt a critical self-reflexivity and shift how knowledge is generated and what ways of knowing are valued in the classroom (Alasuutari, 2010; Andreotti, 2010; Langdon, 2013; Sultana, 2019; Cornwall, 2020). There remains a dearth of research on how to actually do this, especially in the growing space of online education (Spiegel et al., 2017). Most decolonisation efforts in higher education focus on curriculum change and student and teacher diversity, neglecting the harder-to-transform classroom dynamics and knowledge production processes (Langdon, 2013; Sultana, 2019; Cornwall, 2020).

Decolonising online learning

Online education is held up by governments, development agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as a transformative model for higher education that could support achieving global development goals (Mendler et al., 2002; Spiegel et al., 2017). Massive open online courses (MOOCs) have been embraced for their potential to provide developing countries with high-quality, and often free, education (Liyana-gunawardena et al., 2014). Yet these potentials are rarely realised. There is widespread perception of diminished educational quality in online courses, and a concern that rather than democratising higher education, they are pushing an elite commercial agenda that is not accessible to all (Rhoads et al., 2013; Liyana-gunawardena et al., 2014; Adam, 2019).

The growth of MOOCs and the desire to internationalise the curriculum pose significant concerns about the Anglo-American dominance in the educational system and the hegemony of certain knowledge systems (Jöns and Hoyler, 2013; Rhoads et al., 2013). An analysis of MOOC production revealed that nearly all courses are produced by ‘white staff members primarily from the Global North’ (Lockley, 2018: 150). Online learning can also reinforce existing access inequalities, with urban-residing, English-speaking and wealthy students in the best position to take advantage of these new opportunities (Altbach et al., 2009). In a review of open courseware programmes, Rhoads et al. (2013: 98) found no ‘serious discussion’ about ‘the ways in which the [open courseware] movements might actually serve to challenge forms of inequality and marginality’. There is an assumption that if the information can just be spread more broadly, inequalities will vanish.

Some distance learning programmes acknowledge the benefit of diverse students learning from each other, but also note disparities in the experience between distance and residential students (Mendler et al., 2002; DePew and Lettner-Rust, 2009). In the case of a specialty distance learning programme supported by the United Nations Development Programme in the early 2000s, many distance learning students from the Global South lacked strong enough internet connections to watch live recordings,

struggled with weaker English and writing skills, as well as had difficulty accessing library resources and understanding Northern educational system processes and norms (Mendler et al., 2002). Other studies suggest that online students, especially international and second-language students, feel cut off from the on-campus community and equal classroom participation (Dahlgren et al., 2006; DePew and Lettner-Rust, 2009; Cunningham, 2014; Rye, 2014). In these cases, virtual education appeared to reinforce the students' 'physical localisation ... expos[ing] geographical inequalities even when the participants do not discuss them' (Rye, 2014: 13).

Online learning models predominantly follow what the activist educator Paulo Freire (1970) maligned as the 'banking concept of education', where students passively receive information from experts, much as deposits come into a bank account (DePew and Lettner-Rust, 2009; Rhoads et al., 2013). Especially in MOOCs, students are expected to store up rather than critically reflect on the information or produce their own knowledge (Rhoads et al., 2013). Some research shows that live exchange, through a synchronous classroom environment, can help combat this tendency and can provide transformative learning opportunities for students (Barraclough and McMahan, 2013; Spiegel et al., 2017). In these cases, live discussion across (linguistic, cultural and physical) boundaries has proved to be a transformative approach for challenging power relations and taken-for-granted narratives about poverty and development (Barraclough and McMahan, 2013; Spiegel et al., 2017).

There is a nascent debate about whether online and distance learning re-entrench existing global inequalities or meaningfully confront Western institutional hegemonies and power imbalances in the discipline (Spiegel et al., 2017). Much of the criticism of the colonial nature of online teaching has been directed at the MOOCs (Rhoads et al., 2013; Adam, 2019), while the challenge of inequitable participation has been focused on asynchronous online classes (Mendler et al., 2002; Dahlgren et al., 2006; Rye, 2014). In this article, I ask: What types of innovative online pedagogies might help decolonise the classroom?

Methods

This article follows a mixed methods approach, informed by constructivist–interpretivist presuppositions (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2013). Qualitative and quantitative data (focus groups and surveys) were integrated during the data collection phase and in the analysis (statistical and thematic) (Tashakkori and Creswell, 2007). I was a participant observer during this research, and I practised a critical reflexivity about how my role and identities shaped how the research participants responded to me and affected interpretations of the data. Two focus group discussions took place with instructors who regularly teach in our programme. Instructors in our programme include a mix of Regis instructors and development practitioners from a variety of fields. About half of the instructors are male and half female, with an age range from 35 to 60. Three of the instructors grew up in the Global South or in Indigenous communities. During the focus group discussions, I presented preliminary data from student surveys, and we had an open-ended discussion about our successes and challenges in decolonising the classroom. The focus group discussions were transcribed and thematically coded. Voluntary, online student surveys were also conducted after each class. We collected 187 surveys from 16 classes from 2017 to 2020. Institutional review board approval was obtained for this research, and students provided written consent to be part of the research. These surveys replaced the traditional course evaluations, and thus did not take up more of the students' time. At the beginning of the year, we explained the motivations for this research to the students, and whenever possible the surveys were grounded in the material we covered in class to offer students a chance to reflect on their learning. Over the three years, there were 64 unique students in these classes, meaning that most students responded to more than one survey. In the text, I report the percentage of students responding to a particular question as shorthand, but it is more accurate to describe this as the percentage of student survey responses. The survey consisted of 29 questions about social connection and power dynamics in the classroom, which were generated from the literature review and prior student evaluations; 23 Likert scale (agree–disagree) questions provided an opportunity to

evaluate the significance of different themes and relationships, while 6 open-ended questions offered a sense of how students experienced the classroom. Where percentages of students are reported, the numbers reflect the percentage of total survey responses reporting 'strongly agree' or 'agree' with each five-point Likert scale question.

Quantitative data from the student surveys were analysed in SPSS. The student responses were analysed for the independent variables of student location and mother tongue. The three categories of connection location were: (1) in-person, from metro Denver (33 per cent of students); (2) in the US, but not in class (17 per cent); and (3) outside the US (50 per cent). Slightly more than half (52 per cent) of the students responding to the surveys spoke English as their first language. A Kruskal–Wallis H test was used to compare the three categories of connection location and a Mann–Whitney test was used to compare the variables between native and non-native English speakers. The themes discussed in the results were generated deductively from the literature review, and they were supplemented by new themes that emerged inductively from the data sources.

Results

Our pedagogical approach takes on some of the common power dynamics of an online development studies programme evidenced in the literature review. In our research, we have identified six approaches that work towards decolonising the classroom. For each, we describe our pedagogy and present our successes alongside the remaining challenges and tensions.

Build community

In our programme, we are intentional about building a learning community, starting from our orientation workshop. One activity has students tell the story of their name to a partner, who then reports their partner's story back to the group. This activity not only helps students learn about each other, but also fosters listening and the sense of mutual responsibility for each other. We see these skills as the antidotes to domination in the classroom (and development). All instructors are encouraged to continue to design activities and assignments that deepen community connections. These may include longer term group assignments, small-group discussions or quick activities, such as having students describe their favourite meal from childhood, share the last photograph on their phone or explain why a chosen object is significant to them. Our instructors strive to create an atmosphere of curiosity about each other's experiences, and to approach diversity as a resource that leads to more innovative and inclusive development solutions.

In our programme, more than 90 per cent of students reported feeling connected to each other (91 per cent), accountable to one another (97 per cent), like they belong in the programme (99 per cent), and that their classmates were available to help them if needed (91 per cent). Students reported feeling most connected to their classmates when they worked on group assignments and participated in small- and full-group discussions. Some classes also used paired student discussions and peer review to foster a deeper level of engagement.

We include small breakout groups (four or five students) in nearly every class to give students time to critically and collectively reflect on and apply the class topics. These groups allow students to take ownership of the conversation and help build community. As one international student put it:

I really enjoy our small breakout sessions. Especially when we have a few extra minutes after answering the assigned discussion questions, to chat. For the remote students, it's really our only time to connect on an informal level with the other students ... I also really appreciate when we start Monday morning classes with small updates ... Knowing who's planning weddings, who's jump-starting new projects, etc. really helps me feel connected to my cohort, even when we're thousands of miles apart.

Students have also taken charge of their own community by meeting together as a cohort outside the class and starting their own WhatsApp group chats. Still, building community is no easy task, and in every classroom there are likely to be unspoken power dynamics that are not immediately visible to the instructors. In one Gender & Development class, the instructor had students write a reflection article about their different identities and how these position them in society and development. Students were instructed to share their reflections in groups. After class, a student informed us that talking about sexual identity was not only uncomfortable for them, but that they feared being criminalised or targeted by fellow students from their own country or region. We have also observed tensions between students related to prior conflicts between or within their countries, for example between Congolese and Rwandan students. Age and status also appear to influence the way that students treat each other, sometimes negatively, and these markers seem to be particularly visible and important for students from the same region or country.

Administrative norms and academic codes of conduct can also get in the way of creating a shared culture. Many international students entering our programme come with different understandings of the roles of instructors and students, expectations about participation, and norms for academic writing. During orientation, we do an activity where we try to make our education assumptions explicit: students describe their perceptions of an ideal student and instructor, and then we discuss what these look like in our programme. We do our best to learn about where our students are coming from, and to bridge the differences in academic cultures. There are many cultural assumptions about education that instructors might not be aware of until a problem arises. For example, plagiarism is a persistent challenge for some international students. Rather than let this become a moral issue, we do our best to stay patient and to provide additional resources. Plagiarism highlights the tension between typically punitive US university rules and the more organic and community-based set of standards that we try to evolve in our programme.

Another tension we face in building community is language diversity. English is our official language of instruction, but for half of our students, it is their second, third or fourth language. We recognise that this raises challenges from a decolonising perspective. In class, we have observed instructors avoiding calling on students with particularly difficult accents and not engaging with their comments. Students also have some of these difficulties communicating with each other: as one US student said about his classmate in West Africa, 'Adama [name changed] and I have been discussing bias. It has been an enlightening experience; however, I am really struggling with the English accent. I am not sure if I fully understand what he is trying to say.'

There is also some indication that students who are not native English speakers feel less connected in the classroom. Although trust was high overall, 51 per cent of non-native speakers strongly agreed that they trusted their classmates, compared to 74 per cent of native English speakers. (There were non-native speakers both in the classroom and participating remotely.) Non-native English speakers were also significantly more likely to feel that a particular group dominated discussion ($P=.026$).

Since our programme began, we have been working to improve the experience for students who do not communicate easily in English. Admissions and instructors focus on how well applicants can convey their ideas (in English), even if the grammar and spelling is not perfect. In the classroom, we use different methods of participation, and techniques such as sending the questions beforehand and providing time to write and reflect before discussions. All students have access to the University Writing Center, where they can receive ongoing support for improving their writing. In class, we are deliberate about avoiding slang, shorthand and sarcasm that might also leave some students behind.

On the flip side, the language diversity in our classroom is also a source of richness and learning. International development professionals (and global citizens) need to speak multiple languages, and to possess the patience and creativity to communicate even when a first language is not shared. When students speak in their native languages, even just to introduce themselves, it always brings smiles to the faces of the speaker and the listeners. It challenges the implicit superiority of English and welcomes multiple identities and heritages. In small experiments where we opened up space for students to speak in their own language, we found that this was a powerful experience for students, which allowed them a sense of ease and comfort and a more expansive and creative mindset.

Encourage horizontal learning and the co-creation of knowledge

As a programme, we promote horizontal knowledge exchange by providing class time for students to share their knowledge and experiences. More than 95 per cent of our students felt that their experience was invited and respected, and 88 per cent of students said that they felt comfortable sharing their personal experience in class. Nearly all students (97 per cent) also agreed that their classmates' perspectives have contributed positively to their own development practice.

Students provided many examples of what they have learned from their classmates. For many students, this learning was about cross-cultural experiences with development. Reflecting on a class about the role of faith-based organisations (FBOs) in development, a US student commented, 'It was interesting to hear our international classmates' perspectives on FBOs and they were in favour of them because they brought a sense of community/belonging within a community.' Students also learned from the experience of their colleagues in the same country or region as themselves. One student in East Africa recalled learning about an innovative sanitation programme from a student in the same region. She said, 'I realised that we learn from each other and sometimes the problems in developing countries seems to be the same, which is why we can work together to solve these problems.'

The opportunity to engage in dialogue and group projects also helped to challenge assumptions that different groups had about each other, and students commented that dialogue with their classmates shifted or broadened their own views on development. An international student commented:

I used to believe in this quote that says, 'Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime.' However, after discussing the assigned reading with some of my classmates it helped me understand that the fish quote sometimes can be wrong in some cases.

During class, students not only share their own experiences, but also co-create knowledge. We have students present their development challenges to each other to allow collective innovation to generate solutions. Students are encouraged to respond to each other, rather than look towards the instructor as the authority. This happens during discussion and also via chat, where students respond to each other using the @ function to direct their comments to specific people, indicating their agreement, raising new questions or perspectives, or sharing relevant resources. Almost 90 per cent of students reported that they felt comfortable challenging the course material, the instructor and/or their peers.

Open spaces for the whole student to participate

In our programme, we utilise a variety of techniques to create an environment where students feel they can be themselves and share their backgrounds, experiences, values and beliefs. Almost all students (99 per cent) felt that their full self was welcome in class. Our typical tools for opening up spaces for participation include full, small, and paired group discussions, case studies, written reflections, group work, chats, shared Google documents, polling, active listening and demonstrating online presence. Partnering with a local applied theatre group, we have evolved some simple strategies to bring non-academic forms of knowledge and expression into the classroom. Including role play, gestures, story, song and photography broadened the opportunities for students to succeed and validated different ways of knowing. One instructor remarked on how much more students were engaged when he expanded a normally technical assignment on the students' carbon footprints to storytelling.

Alternative approaches to knowledge production also force conventionally successful students outside of their comfort zone, and create a sense of vulnerability where growth can happen. Recalling a session where we focused on the role of theatre in development, a student said:

I loved the experience of practising theatre for development with the guest speaker. It was one of those situations where I definitely went into it with an ego and thought that it was going to

be a 'lame' activity, but the energy and participation from my classmates encouraged me to invest in the activity, and it ended up being one of the most memorable, fun, and rewarding classes so far.

We found that theatre activities, such as mock development scenarios and role-playing activities, have the potential to increase empathy for different stakeholders, explain difficult concepts, and build a sense of community and shared vulnerability in our classes. Importantly, in development practice, theatre for development is also a tool used by practitioners to engage communities, for all the reasons that it works in the classroom.

One challenge in encouraging participation is that some individuals or groups tend to participate more than others. When asked, 'Did a certain group of students dominate full class discussion?', 28 per cent of students agreed or strongly agreed, while about 50 per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed; the rest neither agreed nor disagreed. Students who connected from the US, but who were not physically in class were most likely to feel that a certain group of students dominated full- and small-group discussion. There was no significant difference between the perceptions of students in class and international students.

A few comments from native English speakers connecting from the classroom indicate that they were aware that they spoke more than others, but felt that their classmates looked to them for leadership. One student who strongly agreed wrote: 'I feel bad when I speak too much and feel that there is a subset of the cohort that are opting out of speaking. It often ends up feeling like an ethical choice that harkens back to issues of colonialism.' Another student said that she was sorry for talking so much, but that the silence (after a question is posed) makes her feel uncomfortable. Interestingly, non-US students were more likely to attribute differences in participation to individual personality types, rather than to a certain group of students. Most of these respondents noted that students who talk more do not try to dominate the conversation or push others out. Yet the fact that this question generated such varied responses, and elicited more comments than any other, shows that we could do more to uncover the unconscious assumptions and biases associated with student roles and authority in the classroom.

Decentre Western voices and epistemologies

We strive to introduce diverse voices and perspectives in our syllabuses, case studies and course materials, and to create a classroom where all ways of knowing are valued. When introducing theories and readings, we talk about the positionality of the author and reflect on how someone of a different race, class, gender and so on might have presented an alternative account. In our programme, several instructors are from the Global South or Native communities in the US who bring non-Western epistemologies into the classroom. In courses where subaltern voices are not centrally represented, we invite guest speakers and make sure alternative epistemologies are represented in the syllabus. Video conferencing software Zoom allows us to invite guest speakers from around the world, and we have had representatives from small NGOs and multilateral development organisations, as well as Indigenous activists and social movement leaders, speaking in our classes. Almost all (96 per cent) students felt that they received a range of perspectives in class. Our classes are also team taught to provide a greater variety of perspectives on the class topic. Instructors try to model a relationship of respect and healthy debate that the students pick up on.

These approaches are not without their challenges. As several instructors commented, it can be uncomfortable to introduce non-Western epistemologies without the personal authority to speak to them. Instructors also worry that simply adding a few non-Western readings is tokenistic and fails to truly challenge the authority of given narratives. There is also a concern about reifying and essentialising the differences between Western and non-Western epistemologies, rather than looking at how they inform each other and interact. One way in which we have tried to address these tensions

is by partnering with Diné College on the Navajo Nation in Arizona. Over the past three years, this partnership has allowed our two faculties to co-teach. One course that was offered, Grassroots & Indigenous Activism, grew out of this partnership, and offered an opportunity to present alternative and critical views of development from an Indigenous perspective. The partnership with Diné College also resulted in a three-week immersive summer course about environmental issues on the Navajo Nation. The course took place at Diné College and involved two Regis students from Africa (Ghana and Rwanda), Diné College students, activists, leaders and instructors and a mix of domestic Regis University and Colorado School of Mines instructors and students. The class, and our continued partnership with Diné College, helped students (and instructors) to reflect on their own roles and stories, think critically about the history of development in the US and open their minds to alternative approaches to development.

Apply the critical thinking, reflection and action cycle

More than 95 per cent of students felt that their classes provided them with a chance to reflect on how power operates in development. Several of our classes, including Gender & Development, Participatory Planning and Grassroots & Indigenous Activism are centrally concerned with power. However, it can be difficult to move past unconscious colonial mindsets, which often lead to uneven dynamics in the classroom. Every year, we have students from the Global South who value Western ideas, expertise and technology above approaches coming from their own culture and context, and others who perceive marginalised people within their own country, such as farmers, LGBTQIA+ individuals or rural people as backwards and ignorant. On the other side, we have some US-based students who are so overly sensitive to colonial domination that they feel they cannot have any opinion or play leadership roles in class. These students are likely to reify local development and shy away from critique of grass-roots actors.

We model and emphasise self-reflection as an essential practice for our students in their professional lives. Through self-reflexive assignments and discussion, all students are engaged in an internal process of acknowledging and unlearning complicity in systems of privilege (Kapoor, 2004; Alasuutari, 2010), asking key questions, such as: What should the goals of global development be? What roles should a development worker play? What assumptions and preconceptions do I bring with me into my practice? How does my own identity and privilege shape interactions I have in the development field? This type of critical reflexivity is necessarily uncomfortable, but crucially serves to open up space for alternative approaches to development and continuous professional growth. We have seen that modelling this critical thinking in the classroom provides students with tools for such critique and resistance in their own work and lives.

The students in our programme, who are typically mid-career practitioners and working full time, are well positioned to apply what they learn in the classroom – and then bring the results back to the classroom. This quick feedback loop keeps classes grounded and facilitates the cycle of reflection–critical thinking–action that Freire (1970) advocates: 89 per cent felt that the material that they learned in class improved their development practice. Many of the MDP instructors are also practitioners, and students always remark on how much they learned from the personal experience that these instructors bring to the class. Every class aims to leave the students with practical tools and approaches that they can use in their own work. Several classes structure final group projects around actual development projects in partnership with NGOs or local development efforts. In Denver, we have students engaged in programmes for green energy solutions, Indigenous organising, homeless service provision and multicultural education. These efforts challenge the colonial notion that development is about a certain group of people (typically Euro-Americans) working in poor communities in the Global South. The MDP capstone invites students to bring together the knowledge, theory and skills they have gained into a professional proposal for a new project or programme.

Create connection in virtual spaces

We approach technology as the medium for facilitating human connection and equalising the experience for remote and in-class students. Getting the technology right is critical to promoting dialogue and exchange in the synchronous classroom. Clear audio is foundational: microphones in the classroom allow everyone to be on the Zoom platform without feedback from individual computers. In our classroom, we have a dedicated 'pilot', a staff person who supports the technology environment and coaches individual students in low-bandwidth regions to maximise their connectivity for full participation.

Clear technology protocols are used to help equalise participation and social presence. We require students to inform the class in chat if they need to turn off their videos at the start of class (and in such cases, they are challenged to let the group feel their presence in other ways). This protocol builds trust and transparency in the group. Students are also invited to use virtual backgrounds if they are not comfortable sharing their actual environment on a given day. Our daily participation rubric includes students engaging in discussion, coming to class prepared to discuss the readings, taking responsibility for their technology, and actively listening. Another important protocol is that every student joins Zoom via their personal laptop. This gives everyone in the class and online the same view and starting place for participation. Instructors focus on the class view on their personal computer screen and respond to hands raised in Zoom rather than physically in the classroom. Our class meets at 7 a.m. Denver time to allow students in the US to attend before work, and students located in Africa or Asia to attend after work. This is not a perfect solution, as some students find class times to be too early or late for their schedules, but it accommodates the greatest number of students.

Poor internet connectivity can disrupt learning and lead to frustration and a sense of distance. In every cohort, we have a couple of students, usually those based in rural Africa, who cannot consistently access high-speed internet. As one African student remembered:

sometimes I used to lose internet connection, and when I rejoined the class, I found that others are in a discussion, and I don't have any idea about what is going on and feel uncomfortable of asking the whole class about what is going on, but the class recordings were there as a solution because I go back to and listen to what I have missed during the class, which help me to be on the same page with others.

Recording and archiving classes is one option to help students fill in these gaps. For some students, especially those who pay for internet by the gigabyte, connecting by video and downloading readings (and sometimes videos) can be prohibitively expensive. We have had students not connecting their cameras or downloading readings due to financial constraints. All of our class materials are available digitally, at no cost, as one way to level access. Another disparity between students is their connection devices. There are a couple of students in each cohort who use phones to attend class. The phone interface limits their ability to see their classmates and the lecture, and inhibits other functions such as collaborative Google Docs. In the future, we hope to establish a fund to help bridge these technology gaps for students who do not have laptops or who cannot pay for high-speed internet.

Discussions and conclusions

In contrast to prior research indicating that online learning entrenches existing classroom power dynamics, we found that a synchronous classroom can be a transformative learning environment which offers even more tools and spaces than a traditional classroom for decolonising pedagogy. While our pedagogies were developed in a synchronous development studies programme, they could also be adapted for traditional and online courses across disciplines. We advocate for these approaches as ideals, and acknowledge the many tensions and challenges they present.

We found that building a strong learning community is a necessary first step, especially online, to build trust, encourage participation and create an environment where people can share their full selves.

Our approach aligns with Freirean pedagogy emphasising the active construction of knowledge through dialogue with others. We found that dialogue between students from different backgrounds can be transformative, and that it helped to challenge assumptions and biases, decentre authority, promote self-reflection and co-create knowledge. Our diverse student cohort is at the foundation of this approach. In our programme, tuition is scaled to economic levels in each country, making it possible for all students to access our programme. Connecting from their homes or offices, students are able to remain rooted in their context and continue their development work, rather than leaving for the US and draining their countries of talent.

While we have had success in many aspects of decolonising the classroom, there are some remaining concerns related to: language constraints and the norm of English; expensive and limited access to high-speed internet in some regions; uneven student participation; Western academic cultural norms; and unseen power dynamics. In contrast to existing research (Dahlgren et al., 2006; Rhoads et al., 2013; Rye, 2014) that shows that remote international students are likely to be marginalised in online learning environments, we have no evidence that international students have a less effective or engaging learning experience. This is a positive indication that we are reaching our goal of decolonising the classroom through effective pedagogy. However, our research also draws attention to potential differences in the classroom experience based on whether a student is a native English speaker and where they are connecting from. Gender is another variable that we would like to explore in greater detail in the future. Many of the challenges raised here can be at least partially addressed with greater awareness and deliberate, creative pedagogy. Others, such as internet connection and unseen power dynamics between students, may be more entrenched in global inequalities and harder to remedy. We recognise that we are unfortunately locked into a model where the information and computer technologies that make our programme possible are also intertwined with colonial power dynamics around extractive industries and the international division of labour.

In the rapid switch to online learning as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic there has been a lot of discussion about the limitations of online learning and the potential to increase existing inequalities, but our research shows that a decolonising pedagogy can be successfully employed in a synchronous classroom. Zoom, or other online platforms, can be creatively expanded to allow for collaborative, participatory and multidimensional learning. For our students working in development, the opportunity to learn in a multicultural classroom, to engage in real-life projects, and to apply critical thinking and reflection to development, not only improves learning, but translates into more effective development efforts. Pedagogy is at the centre of the approach described in this article, but a more holistic decolonisation agenda would also include attention to curriculum, university financing, academic support services, student and instructor recruitment, and financial resources.

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Declarations and conflicts of interest

Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflict of interests with this work. All efforts to sufficiently blind the author during peer review of this article have been made.

Consent for publication statement

The author declares that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Research ethics statement

The author declares that research ethics approval for this article was provided by Regis University's ethics boards.

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