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Decolonising higher education curricula: Authentic guiding narratives from academic and learner communities

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ABSTRACT

Decolonising the higher education curriculum is necessary to address the legacy of colonialism that has resulted in racial inequality, including persistent awarding gaps. In practice, there are numerous competing demands on academics' time, particularly in a landscape of post-Covid re-adjustment. To inform the process, authentic narratives from two contrasting, but inextricably connected communities are explored: In the *Student Diary Project*, Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic undergraduate student diaries provide powerful, personal perspectives that underpin the need for decolonising. These first year students draw on personal experiences of 'otherness' and cultural difference, as well as advocating a range of practical measures. In *Stories from Scholars*, academic narratives provide an insight into 'teacher' perspectives on decolonising. Collectively, these demonstrate an understanding of the transformational value of the process, not only for curricula, but also for individual students and wider society. There is considerable commonality between these two community narratives, though students seem less aware of the potential benefits of decolonising on their own personal role in future society. Authentic community narratives such as these provide compelling evidence that will help persuade, engage, and guide academic and learner partnerships in their decolonising activity.

1. Background

Multiple recent global events have shone a light on racial inequality and injustice (e.g. the felling of statues - Cecil Rhodes in Cape Town and Colston in Bristol, the murder of George Floyd, and the emergence of the #BlackLivesMatter movement). In the UK, race inequality has been further highlighted in the post-Brexit growth of nationalism (Official statistics, 2020a), the unequal impact of Covid-19 in socio-economically disadvantaged Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities (Office for National Statistics, 2020b), and in HE, persistent awarding gaps between white and non-white students (Universities UK and NUS, 2019).

While there have been efforts to close awarding gaps and eliminate racism, these recent events have accelerated both the need for, and the desire, to see real, lasting advancement and success. One response to this has been a plethora of decolonising the curriculum initiatives in HEIs. Decolonising allows us to identify and acknowledge the impact of colonialism upon perceived knowledge, pedagogical strategies and learning (Arshad, 2021a, 2021b). It requires us to reflect upon, and address the legacy of disadvantage, injustice and racism, and seeks to re-balance and enrich learning in HE by integrating a much wider range of perspectives in *what* and *how* we teach, and in the *wider learning environment* (Liyanage, 2020).

Decolonising work requires guidance and support, but central to effective curricula transformation is obtaining buy-in from academics. Firstly, this means listening to students (Brown, 2020) who bring perspectives from their experiences inside and outside the classroom, and which when integrated, can strengthen curricula (Shay, 2016). Through the *Student Diary Project*, the research aims to capture insights into the daily, lived experience of university life for BAME students. Secondly, it also means academics travelling together on a journey in a communal, supportive and non-judgmental manner. Through *Stories from Scholars*, the research seeks to explore perspectives on decolonising from academics; what it means, its importance and potential benefits. Authentic narratives from these two communities have different, but crucial roles in engaging the wider academic community in decolonising, and in transforming our curricula.

2. Methods

2.1 *Student Diary Project*

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological approach, using a solicited text-based respondent diary (Meth, 2003). While there are some weaknesses in this approach, it is a useful tool for capturing the rhythms and lived experiences of day-to-day life (Latham, 2014). Fourteen first-year undergraduate students from three science and engineering departments responded to an open call to participate in the BAME Student Diary Project, forming part of the Faculty's decolonising the curriculum work. Diarists were incentivised with a gift voucher and asked to submit a weekly online diary over a period of six weeks during their first term. Some general, non-prescriptive guidance was given on content and length. For their final diary, participants were asked to add their thoughts and observations on decolonising the curriculum. Diary entries were collated and the text coded to identify emerging themes. The purpose was to capture the lived experience of university life for BAME students.

2.2 Stories from Scholars

Here, data were collected using the qualitative narrative inquiry method. Eight academic staff, traversing a range of science and engineering disciplines, were invited to prepare a written narrative in which they responded to a series of 'prompt' questions. Most participants were members of the Faculty 'Narrowing the Gap' task group. The purpose was twofold;

- to explore the range of knowledge, understanding and experience of decolonising curricula across a range of individuals and disciplines, and
- to provide encouragement to colleagues.

Prompt questions invited participants to explain what decolonising the curriculum meant to them, why they think it is important in HE, how it might benefit their discipline, and how it might impact on students' experiences.

For both sets of data, written text was analysed inductively with NVivo, beginning with open and descriptive coding, and progressing iteratively to establish a coding hierarchy, and ultimately to identify emerging themes. These are presented and discussed below.

3. Results

3.1 Student Diary Project

Four key themes emerged from the data and these are outlined below.

a) Theme 1: Being seen as 'other'

Students reflected on the impact of personal experiences of racial inequality and marginalisation, and of feeling, and being seen as, 'other':

The fact that terms like 'People of Colour', and 'BAME' even exist is proof that we're still seen as 'other'.

Times I felt I was being discriminated against. This wasn't something I was expecting or prepared for because back at home I didn't experience anything like this - such as being marginalised or feeling left out.

They express their feelings concerning some of the wider societal and institutional consequences of racism:

One of the lecturers talked about how BAME students end up not doing as well at university compared to other students. This genuinely upset me because I couldn't understand why there is a gap when we are all on the same course!

But not all share the same experiences:

The colour of my skin hasn't hindered the way I interact with people, nor has it affected the way I have learnt. The fact that other people have to deal with racism or backward thinking is saddening and I am glad I chose a university that I feel safe walking around.

b) Theme 2: Identity safety

Students reflected on aspects of the university environment that influence their sense of feeling valued and belonging. This can be conceptualised as *identity safety* (Davies *et al.*, 2005, p278):

".....identity-safe environments involve[s] assuring individuals that their stigmatized social identities are not a barrier to success in targeted domains.... assuring individuals that they are welcomed, supported, and valued whatever their background."

A contributory factor for identity safety was seeing other people like themselves on the course:

What I really like about my course is the diversity. I am different from a lot of people, but as it's a really diverse place, it's a difference that is embraced.

I didn't anticipate how few people of colour would be on my course - it is pure euphoria seeing a person of colour on my course because it's so rare!

Students also commented on formal and informal personal support from friendship groups:

I'm very grateful to have friends - who are also people of colour - who are struggling with the same things as me.

I'm settling down to university and so far, my experience has been amazing!!! Especially with the people around me - I have a group of course mates and they're lovely and supportive.

And of the value of working and learning together for mutual support and identity safety:

The high point of this week was doing a practical as a group. This helped me develop my skills of working with other people and taking account of other people's ideas and perspectives.

c) Theme 3: Family, home and cultural difference

This theme captures student reflections on the impact of cultural differences around religious festivals and practices:

Last year on Eid I had an exam instead of spending the day with my family - but if it was Christmas, there's no way that would happen.

Being able to pray Friday Prayers today while at University - instead of travelling to a local mosque - is such a positive.

Students also comment on home and family cultural differences and their impact and role in the university experience and study:

I am commuting and it's getting dark quicker, and my parents don't like me being out when it is dark, doesn't help - 'cause then I can't stay at Uni late.

Recently, I've been thinking about getting student accommodation as I feel like I need more independence.

In BAME cultures, the topic of mental health isn't something talked about at home, and consequently, it's rarely ever spoken about with peers.

I think sometimes in Asian families there's this pressure to get a good degree and a good job. I revisit this constant fear on a daily basis of letting my parents down and disappointing them....

d) Theme 4: Decolonising the curriculum

Students commented on the importance of seeing themselves reflected in the curriculum, and of being exposed to role models who inspire and motivate them to achieve:

I want to hear about a Bengali scientific researcher making some cool science discovery, or seeing more females in STEM that are from a different ethnicity too.

And they suggested ways in which this could be enhanced through decolonising:

Decolonising.... could be done by promoting research papers by people from different backgrounds, reconstructing the curriculum to learn about other cultures and traditions.

Students themselves developed a greater understanding of other cultures through diversity in the classroom:

I did end up making some amazing friends who aren't of the same ethnic and cultural background as me. This was interesting - and good for me - because I had never met people from those backgrounds, and I got to understand them better.

In relation to this they expressed a desire for mechanisms built into curricula to facilitate socialisation and community-building:

Have students actively working together, not just in labs but in workshops... so everyone gets to meet people from their course and work with them.

Finally, students made some suggestions about the *process* of decolonising:

It needs to begin by decolonising people's thoughts!

Just rearranging things doesn't solve a problem, dealing with it head on so the problem no longer exists is the long term solution.

Highlighting the importance of engaging with students as partners:

It needs to be an open and honest conversation - including us.

3.2 Stories from Scholars

There was a recognition among academic staff that while decolonising the curriculum will involve reviewing content, the process is also about identity safety; providing greater equity in the classroom environment and in learning activities:

Decolonising the curriculum means introducing previously ignored voices, images, authors, topics, theories and arguments.... creating a classroom and environment in which everybody feels safe, valued, respected and able to learn effectively.

This needs a re-think of the pedagogical basis for teaching, learning and assessment that stretches beyond formal curricula and into the hidden curriculum. To achieve this will require going beyond mere completion of tasks, to transformational thinking:

It is not only about taking practical steps.... it requires internal changes through reflection on our identity, agency and individuality - this is hard especially when you are in a position of power or privilege because relinquishing power and privilege is not often appealing.

There a number of reasons that decolonising is seen by academic staff as a necessary, valuable process. From a pragmatic perspective, decolonising should enhance student engagement and help address inequalities such as award gaps:

It's important.... to signal a clean break between the dark deeds of our colonialist past, and our modern day curricula. Otherwise we merely reproduce and reinforce the inequalities that exist.

Decolonising also has benefits for individual students, empowering them to grow in confidence and realise their full potential. This has knock-on effects for society, for feeding a pipeline towards a more diverse workforce in a globalised world, working towards responsible futures with enlightened global citizens:

Decolonisation... will give students a greater awareness and understanding of the impact of past actions on present humanity.... increase their critical understanding of the inter-connected human-natural-economic systems that make up our world, and better equip them as responsible global citizens and agents of the future.

Decolonising will also enable disciplines to be grounded in their historic context, challenging assumptions about the sources of knowledge, and integrating a wider body of knowledge, perspectives, and practices:

Engaging more deeply with every aspect of decolonising the curriculum should help us deliver an equitable educational experience and outcome for all our students. It might well also contribute to a broader.... more critical.... contemporary.... futureproof education.

Academic staff cited a number of curriculum adaptations for decolonising. They include modifying interactions with students (e.g. learning preferred names, treating students as individuals), reviewing curriculum content (e.g. using diverse images, information sources and case studies, inviting guest speakers from non-traditional backgrounds), and modifying learning activities (e.g. offering flexibility and choice in activities and assessment). A common over-arching theme was the need for open, honest dialogue between students and staff. Some of the challenges of decolonising were also acknowledged, including the role and position of BAME staff:

I don't feel I can say I will be decolonising my teaching as I'm often seen as the 'other' and the 'different' already.

4. Discussion and conclusions

Student diaries reveal a range of personal experiences of 'otherness' and cultural difference, together with a strong recognition of the value of friendships and community-building for identity safety. Curriculum adaptations suggested by students placed more emphasis on content, particularly in relation to representation and role models. Nevertheless, there was also recognition of the need for a holistic approach that encompasses learning activities (including extra-curricular), and for staff engagement with students as partners in the process (Shay, 2016). Academic narratives demonstrate a collective understanding of the transformational value of decolonising, not only for curricula, but also for individual students and wider society. Promisingly, academics also recognise the importance of working in partnership with students to decolonise, and are aware of the complexities and difficulties of the task ahead.

Overall, there is considerable commonality between these two community narratives, though students place less emphasis on the potential benefits of decolonising for their own future contribution in a globalised society. This may indicate a lack of self-confidence and personal aspiration, potentially borne of previous 'otherness' experiences. Or, it may show that students find it harder to make the connection between equity and empowerment in education, and the increased opportunities that this affords for their role in wider society. As has previously been observed (Meth, 2003), for some, participation in the diary project was an inward-looking, empowering experience:

I appreciate this Diary Project opportunity a lot... I feel like many of us with ethnic backgrounds have something which bothers us on a day-to-day basis but never really speak out about it. To be given this opportunity not only helped me speak out, but also helped my mental health,

While others saw the outward-looking benefits:

It would be really nice if all people from ethnic backgrounds had the chance to write anonymous diary entries showing their struggles and giving the university an opportunity to combat racism.

Our own university, like many HEIs, is increasingly prioritising Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and embedding it in curricula. The critical, global, systems thinking at the heart of ESD may provide a useful mechanism for encouraging greater confidence and aspiration within a decolonised curriculum.

5. Conclusion

Decolonising the curriculum needs to be addressed as an ongoing process, rather than a set of tasks, and it will take time. However, there are numerous competing demands on academics (Liyanage, 2020), particularly in a landscape of post-Covid re-adjustment and REF outcomes. Even where there is clear quantitative evidence of inequality (e.g. the award gap), many academics may simply be unaware of the daily challenges faced by students as consequence of the colonial legacy. They may also feel that they do not possess the necessary knowledge and expertise. It is here that authentic narratives from these inextricably connected staff and student communities can play a crucial role. On the one hand, insightful narratives from non-expert academic colleagues show there is considerable support for decolonising, and they identify a range of benefits and a realistic awareness of the size and complexity of the task ahead (e.g. Le Grange, 2016). Sharing these narratives through our online toolkit to support decolonising the curriculum will help promote an open and honest, middle-out, bottom-up collegiate approach in which teams of staff work and learn through the process together, using the guidance and resources made available (Taylor and Riaz, 2021). On the other hand, real, powerful and impactful stories from BAME students provide compelling evidence of the *need* for decolonising and will help gain *affective* buy-in. We have created narrated videos around key themes to support this. Students are the experts here, and working in partnership with them will ensure effective curriculum adaptations *and* an empowered student body (Taylor and Riaz, 2021).

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Taught by experience - an approach to integrated learning for first year students in Electrical Engineering.

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ABSTRACT

The OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) provides a list of key competencies which current learners/student should acquire to be future-proof. The three key competencies are „(1) Use tools (language, technology...) interactively“, „(2) Act autonomously“ and „(3) Interact in heterogeneous groups“.

Traditional teaching focuses on providing information. I redesigned the structure of my class “Electrical Engineering” (EE) for first year Bachelor students in order to provide not only fact knowledge transfer, but also to gain and improve said key competencies. In my talk I will present methods and materials, I use, to give my students that expertise. The class format has been changed to an inverted classroom concept. In preparation of the course, the class students work self-paced on teaching videos and easy test questions to gain basic knowledge about a topic (Key 2). In class, students are stimulated to get into discussion with their colleagues via Peer Instruction (PI) questions. To support the discussion between students (Key 3), small whiteboards are handed to student-groups at the beginning of each class. Besides, those whiteboards are used for solving assignments during class time. A supervisor can walk through the room and assesses the progress of the teams. Solutions or mistakes that are worth discussing are presented in the plenum by streaming the whiteboard via a document camera. The teacher establishes a positive