

CHAPTER 6

# 'Can We Think about How to Improve the World?'

## Designing Curricula with Refugee Students

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In an aside in *Death of a Discipline*, a book about the 'death' of comparative literary studies, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak describes sitting in with incoming undergraduates at the City University of New York (CUNY), 87 per cent of whom were in 'so-called remedial' English classes (Spivak 2003: 11–12):

There are Haitians and West Africans in those CUNY remedial classes whose imaginations are crossing and being crossed by a double aporia – the cusp of two imperialisms. I have learned something from listening to their talk about and in Creole/French/so-called pidgin and English-as-a-second-language crossing-into-first – the chosen tongue. I have silently compared their imaginative flexibility, so remarkably and necessarily much stronger, because constantly in use for social survival and mobility, than that of the Columbia undergraduate, held up by the life-support system of a commercializing anglophone culture that trivializes the humanities.

Spivak notes how sitting in with these students revealed to her 'the institutional incapacity to cope with the crossroads of race, gender and class – even when the teacher has the best will in the world'.

This chapter arises from our experiences of listening to students in a context outside the formal structures of the university. We describe a case study of a taster course with two refugee charities in Bristol, in which responsiveness to the students was not a point of departure or classroom technique or feedback mechanism, but the starting point for the curriculum that was pursued. Through this, we consider the value

to higher education institutions of recognising the knowledge that refugee and migrant students bring with them, including those skills they have developed for ‘social survival and mobility’, rather than treating them as having a ‘deficit’ that needs to be made up in ‘remedial’ lessons. In particular, we consider how this might become the work of apparently elite institutions, like Columbia, which are normally closed to such students. This case study thus raises similar questions to those posed by Spivak. How can institutions create capacity to respond to the intersections of race, gender and class, which are often experienced at their most acute by students themselves (or those unable to become students)? How can they enable, rather than constraining, their teaching staff who have the ‘will’ to undertake such work? Like the other chapters in this book, it provides evidence of the transformative and disruptive potential of stepping outside the usual constraints and structures of university life, and the ways in which we might move towards a more equitable admissions process.

## Context

Since 2013, the University of Bristol has offered a year-long Foundation programme in the arts and humanities, which provides a route into undergraduate study for students without any prior qualifications. The Foundation is a year-long course that students take before they start on a degree programme. It provides a combination of study skills and thematic content-based units, one of them a liberal arts-style module called ‘What Does It Mean to Be Human?’, which is designed to introduce students to the range of academic subjects they might study during their degree. If a student completes the programme successfully, they can progress onto an undergraduate degree at Bristol or apply to study elsewhere.

As part of the recruitment activity for the Foundation programme, the university offers taster courses every year. These are designed collaboratively with local community organisations, including those that support refugees, asylum seekers and wider migrant communities as well as organisations working with single parents, those in recovery from addiction, organisations for women involved in the criminal justice system and others. The Foundation programme is relatively small scale, recruiting thirty students per year, and from that around twenty typically progress to a degree. From 2019, it was expanded to incorporate a social sciences pathway, and increased its intake to fifty students, rising to sixty-five in 2020, when Economics and Finance pathways were also added.<sup>1</sup>

When the programme was initially designed, the taster courses were introduced primarily as a way to recruit students to the programme who may not have thought that university study was something they wanted to pursue; or who wanted to pursue it, but felt that the financial risks and the investment of time were too substantial; or who wanted to study, but felt the University of Bristol would not admit them or that they would feel excluded were they to study there. Early tasters were run in partnership with organisations that support single parents, a charity supporting adults experiencing chaotic circumstances (including those in recovery from addiction) and a youth education charity, with a number of students applying successfully to the Foundation programme and positive feedback from others about the wider benefits of the taster in itself.

As the Foundation programme developed, it became clear that these tasters, co-designed in equal partnership with the community organisations that hosted them and the potential students they would recruit, provided a very creative pedagogical space in which ways of teaching and facilitating learning could be expanded and diversified well beyond the conventional methods typical of UK higher education. The tasters have remained valuable as a way to reach students who aren't already at the point of knowing they would like to apply to university: each year, we receive a substantial batch of applications from students who have learned of the course through this route. But they have become something else as well. They became a catalyst for rethinking and transforming the university itself by enabling all those involved to think about what purpose the university serves, how the expertise a university curates should be made available to a range of communities, and how education can be led by learners themselves. This was particularly true in the taster course run by Mwenza Blell in collaboration with Bristol Refugee Rights and Refugee Women of Bristol. In this chapter we combine Mwenza's perspective on what it was like to run this course, with the reflections of Josie, Richard and Tom, who, as former programme directors of the Foundation programme, developed a range of taster courses, and guided the transition of students into university study.

## Case Study by Mwenza Blell

Two organisations, Bristol Refugee Rights and Refugee Women of Bristol, collaborated with the University of Bristol Foundation team to arrange a set of taster sessions about anthropology which were held between

April and June 2015 in the Malcolm X Centre in St Pauls, a neighbourhood famous beyond Bristol for its longstanding Afro-Caribbean population, its Carnival and its 1980 uprising (Slater and Anderson 2012).

Bristol Refugee Rights (BRR) had access to an old projector and a mobile pull-down screen so I prepared and brought slides on my laptop for each session. I assigned no advance readings, expected nothing to be done by the attendees outside of class time, did not expect that the same people would necessarily attend each week, and, although there was childcare made available downstairs, made it clear I was happy with the presence of children. (Participants on the course were able to make use of the creche run by Bristol Refugee Rights each Wednesday afternoon.) I'm an anthropologist but the course, which was built into BRR's existing programme of 'supplementary' courses, was advertised under the name 'Understanding Different Cultures', which avoided the use of a little-known, potentially fearsome and unnecessary word like anthropology. A Bristol Refugee Rights staff member provided essential support for the sessions by targeting people whose spoken English was strong enough to make participation feasible and inviting them to the sessions as well as sending text message reminders each week. BRR, then, provided essential infrastructure and support for participants, without which the taster would not have been possible. The attendees varied in their facility with English but all were able to share thoughts in the classroom.

At the first session, the people attending asked if they would receive a certificate because they liked the idea of getting proof of their participation at the end. Josie McLellan, who was then one of the programme directors, arranged for there to be University of Bristol certificates given at the last session and she handed these out herself. Although we made these certificates look as 'official' as possible, including the university and BRR logos, and printing them on good quality card, the sessions were not officially accredited by the university. If we had decided to pursue accreditation for the course, this would immediately have changed the format and content (since, for example, learning aims would need to have been specified in advance) and would have raised the likelihood that a fee would need to be attached, even if it could then be waived, since all accredited programmes within universities now carry a student fee. In other words, it would have been much harder to get started in anything like a spontaneous spirit or one that was responsive to who turned up. Fifteen people attended at least one of the sessions and six people attended four or more of the six sessions. Those who had attended four or more sessions were offered a certificate. The

sessions were once a week for two hours in the early afternoon just after a very well-attended hot lunch for asylum seekers and new refugees at the centre, but finishing in time to accommodate collecting children from school. Tea, coffee and biscuits were available in each session during a short break about halfway through. It added to the happy and relaxed feeling in each session to have something to eat and drink together, and I noticed the contrast with teaching in the university, where students often bring their own cups of coffee. Having a break together to get drinks is different, less individual, and perhaps it helps to further break down hierarchies.

## Content

In the past when carrying out non-university-credit courses 'in the community', I chose to organise the teaching in such a way that I taught only what the students asked to learn more about and wanted the chance to discuss. The first time I used this approach was in a free and unaccredited English Communication Skills class that I offered as a volunteer in an organisation serving women newly arrived in the UK from South Asia. I knew we would only have a few sessions together so I wanted them to be as useful as possible. We were able to communicate in South Asian dialects and basic English so I simply asked them where they most needed better communication skills so we could focus on the vocabulary relevant to those situations, rather than more generic content they could learn in longer formal English courses once they had settled in. As a result, we practised things like communicating with doctors and nurses about health problems, since language interpreters were rarely provided in those situations. I wanted to do something similar with these taster sessions and Josie was very supportive of the idea.

As an anthropologist, my research practice is ideally to encourage people to talk about things that interest them. The idea of imposing topics that feel irrelevant to people's lives is something which feels unpleasant to me. Perhaps because teaching 'in the community' is more explicitly for the benefit of the people attending, it seems arrogant to think I would know what would benefit them. I believe that the way I've benefited from higher education is that it has given me tools to understand myself, my experiences and the world around me. The reason 'tool' is a useful metaphor is that tools tend to be specific to tasks. I didn't know what tools the people attending my sessions would need because I didn't know what tasks they wanted to tackle. I also don't think it makes sense to ask 'what do you want?' as a one-off question

in this situation since it can be too open-ended. I know from carrying out interviews that asking too broad a question can wreck an otherwise pleasant interaction. It might also be the case that you feel it's risky to admit there are things you don't yet know – you might fear losing face. Once trust has been built, this kind of honesty is more possible. For these reasons, it made most sense to me to approach the curriculum as an ongoing dialogue.

For the first session, I prepared slides explaining my own personal and academic background, introducing anthropology as a discipline, as well as some slides about food and culture, since I thought that was an easy entry point into a whole range of areas: historical, political, economic and so forth. At the start of the session, I introduced myself and asked the students to introduce themselves. I didn't ask for any information about their legal status or expect them to disclose where they were from. I also didn't ask about prior educational attainment. In the section of the lecture about food, I talked about a range of topics in the anthropology of food and eating (domestication of plants, globalisation, food sovereignty etc.) and also invited them to talk about any links between food and identity in their own cultures. The session was lively and generated a lot of great discussion.

At the end of that first session, I explained that I wanted the students to decide what we would focus on, but that our conversations were not to be limited to a single topic on the day. I said I would prepare some slides and activities on topics they chose and that we didn't have to decide on five topics today, we could revisit the choice of topics each week to decide what we would discuss the following week. The students chose to have a full session about food the following week, seemingly excited by the many topics food opened up. The second food session was equally lively and ended up addressing British social norms around food and how anthropology can help us understand the context that we are in as immigrants to the UK. It was striking that the students had noticed, with not inconsiderable hurt feelings, that British people seemed unwilling and unprepared to share food in most settings and reluctant to invite them for a home cooked meal. One attendee explained how in his country eating in public was radically different: when going to restaurants, people arrive and sit with those already eating, rather than separately, and share their food, ordering more to be brought to the shared table. There was relieved laughter as I acknowledged what a big cultural difference there was between that and eating in public in the UK. I explained how habits of highly individualised food consumption are established from very young ages in the UK and how other practices

can make people feel uncomfortable, and that there is research showing that even in the case of special occasions and loved ones visiting from far away, white British people tend not to want to cook food at home to share, instead often preferring to be served individual meals in restaurants (Bush et al. 1998). It felt like I could acknowledge that their observations about eating differences were valid and help to heal feelings of personal rejection by assisting the students to understand that these were acknowledged phenomena and explaining the observations from British people's perspective.

In another session, the discussion unexpectedly ended up being about internet propaganda about Asian countries, and one student from an African country in particular expressed a great desire to learn more about Asia so we agreed to have a session about cultures in Asia. Since anthropology is a subject with an explicitly global reach and there has been work done on every continent, it was possible for me to take on the topic. Such a geographical scope, however, meant the lecture was more of a 'broad strokes' introduction to the diversity of societies in Asia, but the students seemed to really enjoy the session – perhaps because none of the students were from East Asia and their prior education might not have covered this area in significant depth, despite its size.

When we were choosing topics for the last two sessions, the discussions began to build on one another in a very clear way. For the penultimate session, the students asked to focus on understanding poverty from an anthropological perspective. The space was now filled with mutual respect and trust that we had built together and students were able to raise important questions such as why their own countries were poor and had virtually no manufacturing capacities, while others were rich or seemed to be developing. One student brought the discussion around to trying to understand why the US so often bombed other countries, including their own, and seemed reluctant to offer basic aid or adequate reconstruction assistance. We all contributed to these discussions in a sincere way and I was able to draw upon my academic knowledge to offer the students explanations of various scholarly debates and conversations about these topics for them to think with. They then asked for the last session to address the topic of political organisation, asking how to organise societies so they could think about how to improve the world. In many ways, I am still very moved by this request and the fact I was able to offer something in response to it. I am unsure of how to fully describe this experience but I can say that it felt like a validation of the approach I took; the approach of treating people I met in classrooms as thoughtful, intellectually-able beings and letting them

direct the course in order to learn and discuss the topics that they felt were important to them.

In the final session, Josie explained and answered questions about the Foundation programme's options for further engagement with the university. During the same session, the students agreed to come with me to the university campus for a visit and a tour. None of the students had ever been to the university before, even those who had lived in the UK for many years, and even despite the University of Bristol's main site being quite central within the city, easily accessible by public transport. I interpreted this willingness to come with me as concrete evidence of the trust we had built together, especially since the students had expressed negative feelings towards the university during the early sessions. The university has a reputation within the city for being elitist and racist. I engaged in an open conversation at the end of one of the first sessions about the university's racist reputation, with two women who told me about their experiences of rejection and stories of their friends and friends' children being rejected despite high marks. I discussed with them my own reservations about working within the higher education sector in the UK, especially in an elite institution, and I found it interesting (and, of course, a relief) that they were supportive of my presence in it, saying that it was important to have Black people working in the university. During the visit to the university site, students were provided with short presentations about university admissions and financing and had the chance to ask questions based on their personal circumstances.<sup>2</sup>

## Taster Sessions: What Are We Tasting?

I have mixed feelings about the idea that these sessions were a taste of UK higher education. They were, in some clear ways, a pathway for the students to make contact with UK higher education. As in, I am an academic working in the UK and there was a formal way into the university through me and my colleagues organising the Foundation programme. But, in another way, it could be thought of as misleading. I am a Black immigrant and respectful towards and knowledgeable about life in parts of the world from which the students hailed. Most people teaching at the University of Bristol and in comparable Russell Group institutions, however, are not. (The Russell Group is a self-selecting group of twenty-four 'elite' institutions in the UK.)

In addition to this, most of my colleagues do not even aspire to use the teaching methods described above and yet, in my view, it was the



best teaching I've ever done. It was the best in the sense that I felt it was actually achieving the true purpose intended, something which my university teaching is aimed at but tends to fall short because of the rigidity of both the students and the system, which requires syllabi and formal examination. This always keeps the possibility of failure open, leading to attendant embarrassment. Before going to university, I saw a video that showed staff and students taking on projects that were initiated to meet the needs of the community, using their expertise, skills and equipment to address problems. One project in the video involved creating a device out of milk crates to help people with disabilities to swim. I realise now that this was aspirational or a form of outreach, but at the time I believed that responding primarily to challenges like this is what lecturers and students do. It would be great if universities were more relaxed and informal in their approach, functioning outside the rigid structures dictated by syllabi and testing. This teaching felt much more like that.

Perhaps even more problematic than this, there is a deeply entrenched hierarchy of asymmetrical power relations that keeps the existing system in place. These issues were absent within the space of our classroom in the Malcolm X Centre. I didn't expect the students to memorise or even accept the ideas or perspective I was offering, I had no interest in assessing them, there was hardly anything of value I could withhold from them, and I did not reserve most of the class time for my own speaking, there was discussion throughout.

It is also worth mentioning that I ran these sessions during a period of underemployment by the University of Bristol, allowing me to take on the project (for which I was paid on a casual contract), something that would otherwise have been impossible because of managerial control of my time and (as I was told) the department's workload model. Later when the opportunity to run another set of sessions for refugees arose, I was on a full-time teaching contract and, even though I offered to do it without extra pay in addition to my other teaching and administrative work, my line manager refused to allow it. They said that it could cause problems in future if the department was expected to provide additional teaching to other programmes. This seemed a strange way of thinking about me (as something they provide) and the situation (as though I was interchangeable with any other member of staff). However, it brings into focus the question of how academics' time is controlled by a model of management in which refugee education initiatives are not sufficiently valuable to gain support. This incident also highlights the ways in which these hierarchical structures might block opportunities

for staff to carry out appropriate forms of engagement with refugees. It speaks to the fact that the foundation year is unusual in another way, in being interdisciplinary and staffed by permanent and sessional academics from a range of disciplines. This sometimes makes it hard for individual departments to conceptualise a refugee education programme within the rigid structures (and financial pressures) of a teaching plan. The UK HE sector, particularly the Russell Group institutions, tends to be remarkably rigid in its expectations and processes, and inaccessible to the people outside its historical target group:

- childless, white British, middle-to-upper class, privately-educated 18–19-year-olds;
- those without non-academic work or caring responsibilities as this would interfere with a weekly expectation of reading, coursework preparation or revision of 10+ hours in order to keep up;
- those who are able to attend full time and sit 2–3-hour-long hand-written examinations.

The UK's Open University (OU) and Birkbeck College in London famously operate very differently but, unlike in the US, these open models have certainly not translated into more open ways of working across the sector – and, where they did, many of those gains have been undone by a funding system since the turn of the millennium – something that has mitigated against part-time and mature students. There are two-thirds fewer part-time students in English higher education since 2010. Birkbeck and the OU themselves have been forced into drastic changes as a consequence: Birkbeck now offers a large number of full-time programmes for the first time. Portals into the UK HE sector have been periodically constructed in the form of Foundation programmes but these often operate in similar ways. The Foundation at Bristol offered a very interesting set of pathways to bridge the gap between normal ways of living and working and university student life. The tasters were the first step towards building this bridge, with no compulsion to follow the path beyond any particular step. I wish the rest of my university teaching could be more like the taster sessions.

## Conclusions

It is worth noting that none of the students on this taster went on to further study via the Foundation route. Many of them were already qualified to degree level, others had interests that lay beyond the Arts

and Humanities, and some did not qualify for student funding. The Foundation team has subsequently built on this experience with further tasters with BRR and developed a relationship with other organisations that support migrant communities, including Bristol Best Tuition (BBT), an organisation that provides a Somali supplementary school to school-age children in the city on Saturdays. The university has offered both content-led tasters and (subsequently) courses in academic English with BBT and the progression rates are encouraging: six students joined the Foundation programme in 2019. Yet we have also tried to keep a balance between tasters where the route on to further study is a key outcome, and space for those who find the tasters useful in and of themselves. In future work, we hope to consider student voices and experiences from the previous tasters.<sup>3</sup>

These tasters are a very different model of teaching to the one we are used to in UK universities. The taster course has no formalised curriculum, no set texts, no assessment, no accreditation, no attendance requirements and no fees. It also, as the case study makes clear, has fewer of the hierarchies of class, race and nationality that characterise UK higher education. It is widely acknowledged that these social and educational structures do much to exclude less-privileged groups, or to discriminate between them within the system, as Spivak's comparison of CUNY and Colombia also reveals. The taster allowed us to – temporarily – remove these structures, giving us a glimpse of what a university that was student-centred and had some of the capacities that Spivak imagined might look like. And this might also thus liberate the teaching staff involved in such programmes. In my experience, taking away some of the pedagogical, financial and structural constraints created a space that felt far freer and more creative than university classrooms normally tend to. It is also striking that the students' interests led them so quickly to the question of how to make things better, something that was both practical and utopian. We might say that a course that was designed as a 'taster' of higher education for those outside the university can also act as a taster of what higher education might be like if it were organised differently.

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## Notes

1. For a fuller account of the Foundation programme, see McLellan, Pettigrew and Sperlinger (2016); Sperlinger, McLellan and Pettigrew (2018).
2. For wider context on race in higher education in the UK, see Ahmed (2012) and Dale-Rivas (2019).
3. For an example of student perspectives on the tasters, see ‘Life Long Learning’, an article in which students from a BBT taster are interviewed, in *Up Our Street*, a community-led magazine in Bristol (Summer 2019), p. 17.

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