

“Decolonising pedagogy and e learning: challenges and possibilities”

Paper given at: The NERUPI CONVENTION - Online Learning: Quick Fixes or New Beginnings?
17/18 September 2020, University of Bath, MS Teams.

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Introduction

I think we can all agree the recent public execution of George Floyd by the Minneapolis police in the US coupled with the global COVID-19 pandemic and the disproportionate impact it is having on Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities and indigenous people across the world, has given new impetus to ongoing demands for eradicating institutional racism.

The trashing of the statue of the slave trader Edward Colston and supplanting of a statue of Jen Reid, a local Black Lives Matters activist, has reenergised the debate around decolonisation the role of university. Symbolic moments like these are important as they motivate people to act, but the real challenge is the dismantling of the racist dehumanising myths we harbour in our minds and everyday practices.

Though the demand for anti-racist education and decolonisation of the university is not new, the present crisis, and the data on BAME deaths, whether this is due to COVID-19, Police Brutality, war, conflict, refugee movements etc. Conversations on how centuries of white-privilege and colonialism continue to impact communities racialised as ‘non-white’ have seen a significant amplification; and in this regard, the many conversations that are taking place within the sector and society at large, about entrenched institutional racism and white privilege and supremacy, are to be welcomed.

In the past problems faced by what is inappropriately termed ‘BAME’ communities (that is because we are actually talking about global majority people not ‘minorities’) have tended to be explained away through racialised tropes associated with biological, moral, cultural and social pathology. The dominant narratives have in turn painted a picture of non-white people, (black people, brown people, global majority people, or people of colour), as being inherently and genetically predisposed to morbidity, mortality, educational failure, criminality and so on.

However, and this is the good news, there is also now considerable momentum to confront such explanatory frameworks and associated mindsets by focusing on the production and reproduction of white supremacist ideologies and practices, structural racism and its entrenchment within our organisations, which in the context of today’s conference, our institutions of higher education and research.

Time does not permit me to offer an expansive account of the history of colonialism and the development of the university, but over the next 20 minutes or I would like to highlight aspects of the current thinking on decolonising pedagogy specifically within the context of a dramatic shift from face to face class based toward online delivery of learning.

Shift to online learning

Whilst companies and governments almost always extol the virtues of technological development and present this to be synonymous to human development, in reality, rarely is any technological or scientific innovation value neutral. Within the context of the last 500 years or so, with development of mercantile capitalism, chattel slavery and western colonialism, we can see how technological developments across a range of fields, such as transportation, including human transportation, discipline and punishment, war and weaponry, business development and accounting, agriculture, medicine, security and surveillance, are never benign and are often driven by a cocktail of interests linked to the production and reproduction of privileges linked to class, race/nation, gender.

As for education systems, and higher education in particular, until past 100 years or so, because these were largely the preserve of the privileged male elites, huge blind spots existed about their complicity with the forces and structures of exploitation identified above. Indeed, until very recent times, within academia, ideas about genetically or biologically endowed innate higher intelligence of white middle men was an implicit norm. And coupled with this elitist view of human difference was also a pedagogical approach that was largely based on rote learning and transmission of 'knowledge' and the pedagogical technologies had changed little since the establishment of Plato's academy.

Take for example the sacred 'lecture' and 'essay'. The lecture is synonymous with universities and as a pedagogical method it can be traced back to Plato's Academy founded in 428/427 BC. The lecture was widely adopted in both the early Christian and later Islamic Universities through the medieval period. Because books were scarce or horrendously expensive to produce, the professor standing at a lectern reading out what was essentially the content from a book was the best and perhaps only way to enable access for students to knowledge. Fast forward 2500 years and until relatively recently most of teaching in universities, with some exceptions, was largely configured around lectures and we still hold on to the sacred titles of 'lecturers' and 'professors.'

I am not sure about other people's experience, but my experience is that, by and large, traditional lectures are at best uninteresting and at worst torturous. But perhaps the greatest indictment of this instructional top down method, where the teachers is the narrator, as the Brazilian Educationalist Paulo Freire, notes, is that it results reducing learning to a process of 'Banking'. This approach, as he notes, functions as a key mechanism in what he termed the Pedagogy of the Oppressed. As he notes:

The more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world. The more completely they accept the passive role imposed on them, the more they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited in them. (Pedagogy of the Oppressed)

Any project that is seeking to decolonize the university, virtual or actual, must begin from an acceptance that western education systems and the pedagogies and technologies deployed in them have, by and large, functioned to reproduce and justify systems and practices of colonialism and imperialism. Indeed, primarily due to student activism and the Black Lives Matter movement, many of our so called elite universities, including Oxford and Imperial, are currently conducting audits of their histories and any complicity with colonialism and slavery.

Double edged nature of Technology

In associating the history of technological and educational development with systems of oppression and exploitation, I am not suggesting that technological developments are by definition wholly a bad thing - who can, for instance, deny the benefits of personalised transportation in the form of the car?

With most technological developments, like the invention of the internal combustion engine, there are always winners and losers; integration of technology into our lives is a double-edged sword: While technology can appear empowering, it can also create barriers if applied without thought, especially in relation to its primary and most critically secondary impacts on existing inequalities.

One of the many perceived advantages of modern computer based technologies, especially in the online space is, in contrast to traditional classroom based environments, their capacity to facilitate personalised learning. Indeed, it is argued that online learning offers new possibilities for us to network and connect with people and to access knowledge in ways that would have been impossible in real world spaces, and that this is a game changer.

However, given the double edged history of technological innovation discussed earlier, especially in the current period, where within a matter of months we have moved discontinuously from class based pedagogy as the norm to online digital pedagogies, we must pause and reflect on the potential hazards and dehumanizing effects.

In doing so, I am not arguing that the choice is between class based and computer based remote learning, not least because under the circumstances, it seems we have little choice; we are all now compelled to incorporate digital pedagogy into our teaching and lives more generally. But what we must do is look at the dehumanizing effects of personalised, digitally driven pedagogies.

Crisis or Opportunity

Given that the primary aim of decolonizing the university, and pedagogy in particular, is to humanise, I would like to argue that there never was a more important moment for us to consider and integrate the many valuable insights that we have gained from the broad spread of pedagogical principles associated with critical, anti-racist, decolonised and indigenous pedagogies. Indeed, if there ever was a moment to strike the hammer, it is now in a moment of profound crisis and discontinuity in higher education.

In a paper entitled, *Sometimes the world needs a crisis: Turning challenges into opportunities* Maria Langan-Riekhof, et al (2017) identify 6 key benefits of past crisis which I think are all evident in the current moment:

1. **Rapid problem solving and innovation:** “Necessity is the mother of invention,” and often a crisis acts as the forcing mechanism to compel expeditious innovation, leading to rapid advances in technology, policy, and/or procedures.
2. **Increased resiliency for the next event:** The measures taken to survive and eventually end a crisis often make an organization or country stronger and more resilient for future events.
3. **New levels of cooperation—even among rivals:** Large scale crises that challenge multiple interests and equities have a way of pulling together diverse partners—allies and rivals alike—to solve the crisis.
4. **Systemic change:** Global crises that crush existing orders and overturn long-held norms, can pave the way for new systems, structures, and values to emerge and take hold.
5. **Dramatic policy shifts:** Sometimes the fear generated from a crisis and corresponding public outcry enables and even forces leaders to make bold and often difficult policy moves.
6. **Emergence of talent:** A crisis has a way of letting the cream rise to the top. In the midst of a crisis, those with the right skill sets and talent –

What does all this mean for decolonizing the university? Put simply, the university as we have known it is history. The dramatic shift in the center of gravity towards online learning is not going to be reversed and, as we see the increased diversification of the student body across the sector, the demand for racial justice is likely to become stronger, so now is the moment, as HG Wells famously wrote to ‘**Adapt or perish**’.

Internationalisation and digital colonialism

One of the greatest benefits of e learning, notwithstanding the problem with time zones, is the ability develop and deliver transnational education, to small and large numbers of people, as in the case of MOOCS. British and American Universities, due, amongst other things to the hegemony of the English Language and reputation, have been extremely successful in whole internationalization project. The positive view is that internationalisation in higher education is

a response the proliferation of the knowledge economy and to foster development. The negative view is that it has become the new vehicle for Western colonialism and economic exploitation.

Whatever view one takes, it seems doubly important that when designing international online programmes, the issue of colonialism and white western supremacy is a critical consideration. Research by Spiegel, et al (2017) in a paper entitled *Decolonising online development studies? Emancipatory aspirations and critical reflections.* Post what I think is a critical question, namely, *“Can e-learning be driven by and not merely ‘include’ (in tokenistic or culturally reductive fashion) decolonial thinking rooted in alternative epistemologies besides dominant Western paradigms?*

- need to ensure that the preoccupation with technological innovation does not overshadow deeper inequalities, ensuring that ‘technofetishism’ does not displace focus on complex equity debates.
- to actively tackle structural inequalities that begin at the admissions, recruitment and curriculum set-up stages of online programmes.
- how the curriculum design process should take into account technology barriers for those on low-incomes, both UK and international.

The problems of epistemology and ontology do not go away in online learning environments. If anything they can potentially become more obscured where the production of materials of learning materials, especially with MOOCs can become significantly detached from the delivery.

Digital colonialism occurs when indigenous populations use resources developed by the colonial population. This can happen with online learning, and is a danger when millions of learners from countries around the world join massive open online courses (MOOCs) run on platforms developed in just a small number of rich western countries.

Michael Kwet, in a recent piece entitled *“Digital colonialism is threatening the Global South”* argues that there is a real danger that like classic colonialism, digital colonialism is rooted in the design of the tech ecosystem for the purposes of profit and plunder.

“If the railways and maritime trade routes were the "open veins" of the Global South back then, today, digital infrastructure takes on the same role: Big Tech corporations use proprietary software, corporate clouds, and centralised Internet services to spy on users, process their data, and spit back manufactured services to subjects of their data fiefdoms.’

Bias and Technology

Another aspect of colonialism is what has been termed the 'colonial' gaze, something that is powerfully examined by Frantz Fanon in his classic text 'Black Skins, White Masks. Through a reflexive examination of his own experience, Fanon offers a lucid account of his entrance into the white world where he feels almost crushed by the weightiness of the 'white gaze'. In doing so he seeks to the creation, maintenance, and eventual rigidification of white-scripted 'blackness', Though some claim that like other technologies, digital technology is value neutral, that computers are disinterested bits of hardware and software. For sure, computers and computer systems do not have a soul, but at the same time it is also true that technology is created and services by value driven human beings, to serve the interests of human beings, that is power.

In the context of colonialism, as Browne, S. (2015) argues, 'from the panoptic slave ships of the Middle Passage to modern policing tools deployed against protesters. Amid recent police shootings of unarmed black men, technologies have historically objectified, categorized, and repressed black people.

One of the impacts of a surveillance culture is alienation and a sense of un-belonging, and there is evidence that the increased depersonalisation of the university experience, as can be the case with online learning, can/will impact BAME students more.

Another area of concern is the deployment of data analytics to constantly surveil students behavior, something that has become exponentially expanded through the shift towards online learning. Again, while tracking students movements and behavior might have benefits, because systems are designed and interpreted by human beings, there is always the danger of bias or worse.

One of the key issues relating to addressing racial inequity in higher education is the issue of bias, conscious and unconscious. Though the research on this is quite thin, there is an interesting recent study at Samford University by Baker et al. (2018) looking at the issue of Bias in Online Classes:

The researchers created fictional student accounts, with names that most would identify as being either white, black, Indian or Chinese, with male and female names for each racial/ethnic group. They then analysed the interactions.

Despite the comparative anonymity granted by asynchronous, digitally mediated interactions in online discussion forums, the sort of bias that concerns many educators in face-to-face instruction is also present in online education; instructors were 94 percent more likely to respond to discussion forum posts by white male students than by other students.

So the key point here is that any introduction of e learning systems, from the design, implementation and evaluation stage, as matter of law, ethics and economics, universities need to involve a diverse range of stakeholders to ensure they comply with equity requirements.

Pedagogy

One of the greatest transformations that have taken place in universities over the past 25 years or so is in the realms of pedagogy, which I think has been driven by 3 key aspects:

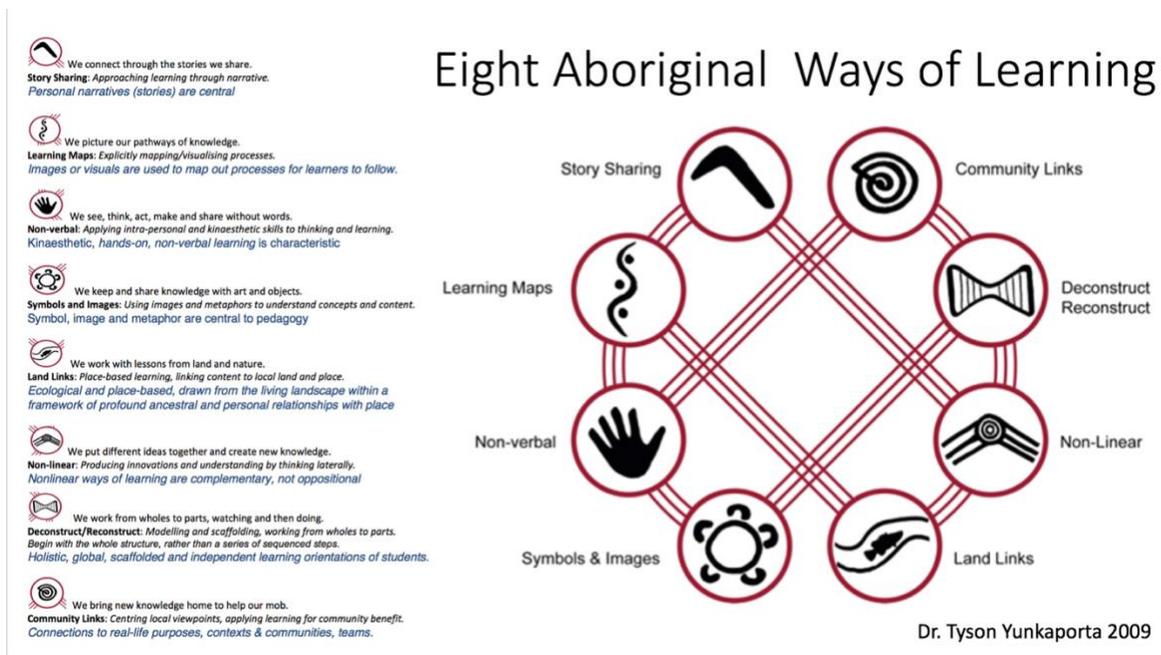
1. Expansion of higher education and hence diversification.
2. Inclusion, retention and success - both as an economic and moral imperative
3. Technological change and a realization of the importance of pedagogy.

And as we face an uncertain future, I believe the question of climate change and environmental justice will become a key driver.

The theme of today's conference is about 'new beginnings' and whilst we have as a sector made great strides in widening participation, we haven't really transformed the pedagogy to reflect the new realities. I think in the present crisis, there is a great opportunity to make a radical break from our past and look to other pedagogical traditions for inspiration, such as for example, 8-ways Aboriginal Pedagogy Framework developed by Dr Tyson Yunkaporta (2009) is from a 'Bama' background (People from the forest) from Queensland who carves traditional tools and weapons and also works as a senior lecturer Senior Lecturer, Indigenous Knowledges at Deakin University in Melbourne

His Aboriginal pedagogy framework is expressed as eight interconnected pedagogies that have a holistic view of learning which is quite different to the rigid computational linear models. As with all pedagogy it is a point of entry into this way of knowing, and we all know that there is a big difference between assimilating knowledge and knowing. However, one of the key advantages of e learning over traditional class based teaching is the ease with which one can introduce a wide range of media in asynchronous ways and this actually fits in well with Aboriginal Pedagogy.

1. **Story Sharing:** Approaching learning through narrative – story boards-
2. **Learning Maps:** Explicitly mapping/visualising processes.
3. **Non-verbal:** Applying intra-personal and kinaesthetic skills to thinking and learning.
4. **Symbols and Images:** Using images and metaphors to understand concepts and content.
5. **Land Links:** Place-based learning, linking content to local land and place.
6. **Non-linear:** Producing innovations and understanding by thinking laterally or combining systems.
7. **Deconstruct/Reconstruct:** Modelling and scaffolding, working from wholes to parts (watch then do).
8. **Community Links:** Centering local viewpoints, applying learning for community benefit.



Concluding comments - The way forward.

1. Move away from industrialized curriculum delivery and assessment methods and toward incorporating the new and multiple methods for generating, curating and journaling ideas. For example, instead of requiring students to write an essay, we might want to ask them to produce a digital portfolio, a wiki or a Facebook page.

2. Rethink how to integrate dialogue and discourse in online spaces:

Though I would argue there is space for a well-crafted lecture, we must be vigilant that long monotonous lectures and powerpoint presentations will be even more problematic in online spaces. At least in a physical classroom there is some social interaction, but online, it is much easier to lose the student. All the research tells us that to enable deep learning we must move beyond not only the didactic methods, but also the kinds of packaged competency based approaches driven by learning objectives, worksheets with closed ended questions, tool kits, decontextualised videos etc. Decolonised pedagogy encourages dialogical, real live approaches, which require human connection and interaction. Some might argue this is never possible with e learning, but there are things we can do to preserve the humanity of learning experiences in online environments.

3. Critical self-reflection: The unintended consequence of the COVID-19 crisis is that it has made us all reflect on what is really important in life. It has reminded us that life itself is not reducible to a set of objectives, or events, but is a process where not only does one accumulate knowledge about the world around us, but where one constantly re-evaluates one sense of

being and place and purpose. For me this is where questions of ontology (being and purpose) and epistemology (knowing) come together to nurture wisdom.

And for me above anything else, decolonised pedagogy is about displacing the obsession we have in higher education, with generation and transmission of **information and knowledge**, with a passion to nurture what I call '**situated wisdom' and knowing**. And I see no reason why we cannot harness the digital environment to make this shift.

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