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Going Beyond the Difficult Conversation in Decolonising Pedagogy

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Abstract:

How should we decolonise curricula? This question is driving the prospect of a new pedagogy across HE institutions. Working in an institution with a student and staff population representing a range of nationalities and ethnic groups, many of which have personally affected by colonisation, it might be assumed that we know the answer to this question. But this is not the case. Our students, faculty, professional staff and Executives maintain divergent views about the definition of decolonisation, and why and how should we engage with it. Obviously, this means that we are not on the same page and, this impedes the formulation of a shared understanding of the rationale, method and outcome of the process of decolonising pedagogy. In this paper, therefore, we will describe and reflect on social and organisational conditions in starting the process of shared understanding, leading to the development of our three-year decolonising the curriculum plan.

Paper: Transformative learning has been described as "learning which involves qualitative changes in the learner's meaning perspectives, 'frames of reference' and 'habits of the mind'" (Mezirow and Marsick 1978, Mezirow 1991). This transformative learning process comes against the background of Aston's quest to embed racial equality at the institutional level.

Herein, we describe and reflect on social and organisational conditions in starting the process of shared understanding, leading to the development of our three-year decolonising the curriculum plan. In pursuing this work, we have identified that this transformation needs to start with our staff.

Stage 1: Flattening the traditional power/knowledge nexus

Parker Palmer describes teaching as 'a daily exercise in vulnerability' (1997). This was helpful when framing the context of our discussions about race within Aston University's decolonisation working group. Higher education's hierarchical norms around leadership, presentation of materials and notional membership of committees lends itself to poor interaction. Power relationships need to be challenged because 'feeling less powerful or less valuable always hampers a discussion' (Johnson 2015). In conversations around race, the traditional method of selecting a committee Chair based on seniority presents a dilemma: these individuals are more likely to be white and/or indifferent. Over-

reliance on PowerPoint can be unhelpful as using of slides 'lend authority to the speaker' (Driver 2003) and 'bestow authority on their expositor' (Rose 2003).

As a result, our approach has been to

- Put out a series of institution-wide calls for staff and students to join a working group, emphasising that all are welcome.
- Create a safe space for group members (nothing is recorded and no minutes are taken).
- Have a 'facilitator' with a leadership style of building high levels of change readiness, adopting a non-confrontational yet uncompromising stance, simultaneously paying attention to Aston's complex, diverse, and layered environment rather than a traditional 'Chair' for the group.
- Use communication technology – Microsoft Teams – to encourage continuous dialogue between meetings and sharing of resources.
- Work closely with Library Services on online resource creation.

The result is that members of the group are able to participate in a variety of ways: through in-meeting discussions, suggestion of resources, and development of online resources that form a tangible output from our discussions.

Stage 2: Creating an open and compassionate learning environment

Our conversations started with an acknowledgement that discussions would cover a range of perspectives, approached generously, and listened to with respect. Over the course of twelve months, we collectively developed a framework that meets the specific needs of our community. Considering our diverse student body, we agreed that our approach to decolonising was broadly to enhance the range of resources and perspectives that we cover in our teaching. We felt that engaging our students would be key to the success of this initiative. In trying to address race attainment gaps in the US, Singleton and Linton argue that 'in courageous conversation, the solution is revealed in the process of dialogue itself' (2014), and this resonates with our experience.

The process of decolonising is an emotional experience for those who participate in it. We have observed that it stimulates and produces intense emotional (for and against) and normative (right or wrong) responses among the participants involved. Members of the group tended to agree on the need for decolonisation, but had divergent views on the method and intended outcome. It is necessary, therefore, that HE institutions discourage the shallow tick-box approach and encourage deeper transformation of the curriculum and the way it should be taught.

Stage 3: Strategic allyship?

Decolonising what and how we teach involves appraising the historical development of each academic discipline by defining and applying the criteria of including/excluding the learning material and the way it should be taught. This is an immensely difficult task and requires extensive research, experimentation, and conversation/dialogue specific to each academic discipline. The realisation of this process depends on whether the universities at the Executive level support it and earmark necessary resources to accomplish the desired outcome i.e. a decolonised pedagogy. By engaging Executive staff in our challenging discussions, we have been able to obtain senior allyship of the project. However, we recognize that the success of this endeavour will rely on more than passive support, and instead requires true allies who encourage and challenge prejudice (Salter & Migliaccio 2019).

Concluding remarks

In our approach, the difficult conversations have been the starting point of institutional change. Our next steps are to engage staff more widely in these important conversations and to embed such discussions into our pedagogical review processes.

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