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Implementing Decolonization: Lessons from an automated reading list analysis tool

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Abstract

Decolonizing higher education is a monumental task. Reading lists represent a possible avenue to begin this activity. At Imperial College London, we sought to understand the geographic distribution of articles included on the College's reading lists, with the goal of determining whether certain perspectives are privileged over others. To aid this process, we developed a tool that converts reading list data into machine readable code, automatically gathers article meta-data from various databases, and collates this information on a virtual dashboard. Providing this service, however, can only be helpful if end users engage with it. Normalization Process Theory, a framework from the field of implementation science, can help understand how new practices are embedded within an organization. In interviews with academic and library staff within the School of Public Health, analyzed using NPT, we derived lessons for operationalizing our tool, and for enacting decolonization of the College more broadly.

Full paper

Introduction

Decolonizing higher education is a monumental task. Institutions have focused on removing colonial iconography (1) or renaming buildings that reference scientists whose research supported colonial ideology (2). While these initiatives show good will on the part of the institutions that enact them, they can be criticized for being somewhat superficial, and not grappling with the type of "intellectual decolonization" that is needed to fully redress historical inequalities (3). One way this intellectual decolonization could be achieved is through querying *what* is taught, from *where* that research originates, and *how* it is taught. Valuing knowledge produced by institutions in previously colonized countries equally to research produced in the west, rather than discounting or ignoring it, could prove crucial to decolonizing hierarchies of knowledge (4,5). Yet, too often, "decolonization" is used as a buzzword, embraced for its cachet, but discarded for its lack of tangible outcomes (6).

Methods

At Imperial College London, we have previously described efforts to understand the reactions to decolonization (7), and methods created to automate the process of analyzing reading list data, so it can be done at pace and at scale (8). Since then, a collaboration between the Abdus Salaam Central

Library (itself renamed following a report by Imperial's History Group (9)), ICT and researchers the School of Public Health has resulted in the creation of a tool which collates article meta-data from several databases on the data visualization platform Power BI (10). The dashboard includes a map, indicating the geographic distribution of research articles from a reading list, as well as a metric, the Citation Source Index, that allows teaching staff to judge how weighted their reading lists are towards articles published by academics at institutions in high-income countries. Teaching staff can find their reading lists, track changes to the geographic distribution and CSI over time, and, as subject matter experts, query whether changes can or should be made to their respective reading lists.

However, as insightful as this service may be, it only has the potential to result in change if the intended audience engages with it. Normalization Process Theory (NPT) (11) is a mid-range theory from the field of implementation science that concerns itself with understanding the organizational and individual-level factors that impact the embedding and routinization of a new practice. It consists of four domains: Coherence, Cognitive Participation, Collective Action and Reflexive Monitoring. To gain insight into the circumstances that might influence the adoption of the automated reading list analysis tool, we conducted semi-structured interviews with teaching and library staff at the School of Public Health, and observed meetings where the tool was introduced and discussed. Using NPT as a guiding framework for data analysis helped identify the dynamics that governed the roll-out of the tool.

Results

Users expressed fascination with the novelty of the tool, having this type of data at their fingertips, and receiving feedback on a previously unknown aspect of their teaching practice – their reading lists. Yet, they also highlighted concerns about the learning curve associated with the tool, which would impact on their already busy schedules. Many respondents focused on the CSI to benchmark their reading lists and compare them to others. They wondered what a "good" or "bad" CSI might look like. Despite this superficial focus on the metric, some also understood what it represented, and that it invited them to think and reflect more deeply on the factors that govern the production and diffusion of knowledge globally. It is this last point that holds significant lessons for the wider process of decolonization.

Too often decolonization is claimed as a goal but left to fall by the wayside. We discovered several parallels when observing the roll out of the tool. For a long time, the tool was left without significant investment, the information it contained became out of date, its utility waned, and it threatened to become obsolete. We found that implementation is most successful when it is understood as a managed process, rather than a singular outcome. Continuous and intentional engagement of stakeholders – provosts, teaching staff and librarians – through demonstrations and scaffolded discussions were crucial to securing implementation. This could offer a roadmap for decolonization more broadly.

Conclusion

Decolonization in higher education institutions threatens to be disregarded and abandoned. Instead, it must be seen as a process that requires careful management, accountability, and room for conversation. If decolonization can be reconceptualized as an exercise that must be implemented, rather than simply appropriated, it could prove transformational in higher education.

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