Students as partners in decolonising the curriculum: lessons learnt at the University of Brighton, UK

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Abstract

This case study examines a continuing student-staff work-in-partnership project to decolonise the curriculum (Bhambra *et al.*, 2020; Arday 2018; Bovil *et al.*, 2016) at the University of Brighton. We reflect on the decolonising activities used, in order to identify how local grassroots activities are contributing to shaping wider institutional change. The University's 'Curriculum Advisers Scheme' was originally launched as part of a broader, University-wide initiative called 'Developing Learning Communities', which aimed to develop a sense of belonging and community for students by means of student-staff partnerships (Healey *et al.*, 2014). Curriculum Advisers were recruited in the two disciplinary areas of Humanities and Art in 2018-19 and 2019-20, with the purpose of creating activities, events and resources relating to decolonisation of the curriculum. Student-staff partnerships in the School of Humanities have continued to evolve past the completion of the second year of the project. While, in 2018-19, the focus was on building resources, in 2019-20, a newly established and largely black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) student-staff group set out to achieve some specific objectives, including a student audit of module reading lists, the co-development of a student-staff blog addressing various aspects of the process of decolonising curriculum and a student-led panel discussion event with an invited external speaker and staff. In this case study, we celebrate the successes of the last two years of the project, but also highlight challenges to be faced in developing liberationist modes of partnership work within the technocratic structures of higher education (HE). This case study evaluates the Curriculum Advisers project, with reference to a Freirean pedagogy of partnership, identifying positive actions that work to counter neoliberal and technocratic threats to meaningful work in partnership, and also outlines some of the challenges of working within this framework.

Introduction

In this case study, we examine the development of a student-staff work-in-partnership project at the University of Brighton and identify effective strategies for students and staff working together as a diverse team in order to create positive change. The 'Curriculum Advisers Scheme' was originally launched in September 2018, as part of a broader, University-wide initiative called 'Developing Learning Communities'. This project aimed, through student-staff partnerships, to build and establish for students a greater sense of belonging and community (Healey *et al.*, 2014) and it focused on three areas: developing collaborative approaches to project planning and evaluation, embedding well-being in the curriculum (in terms of content and resources) and decolonising the curriculum. The focus on decolonising was a response to the calls of a number of student-led campaigns, both internationally and in the United Kingdom (UK) – Rhodes Must Fall, University of Cape Town; Rhodes Must Fall, Oxford University; Why is My Curriculum White?' and #Liberate My Degree, UK National Union of Students (NUS) – which sought to address the dominance of the Western canon of thought and knowledge production (Arday and Mirza, 2018) and the

ways by which the existing higher education (HE) curriculum has been racialised as white (Peters, in Arday and Mirza, 2018).

This discussion focuses on how local, grassroots, student-staff partnership decolonising activities help to shape wider institutional change; it also identifies the challenges involved. As our reflections are based on the pilot stage of the Curriculum Advisers Scheme (subsequently redeveloped as the 'Inclusive Practice Partnerships Scheme'), this paper's format differs from that of a traditional case study and may more usefully be regarded as a reflective provocation, celebrating the successes of the past two years of the project and highlighting the challenges faced in developing liberationist modes of partnership work within what Peters and Mathias (2018) refer to as the 'domesticating and technocratic structures' of HE.[i]

Working in partnership has long been recognised as a process mutually beneficial for students and staff, fostering, as it does, "*engaged student learning and engaging learning and teaching enhancement*" (Healey *et al.*, 2014, p.7). This Healey *et al.* study recommends the establishment of work in partnership across the inter-related fields of learning, teaching and assessment: for subject-based research and enquiry; for exploring and enhancing the scholarship of learning and teaching; and in curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy. Key to effective work in partnership is the central notion of 'partnership learning communities', described by Healey *et al.* as created through the establishment of a set of shared values, attitudes and behaviours embodied by all involved, as well as of working and learning arrangements supportive of partnership. In the development of the first two years of the Curriculum Advisers project, these ideas shaped the ways of working for students and staff in the schools of Humanities and Art.

Context

During the academic years 2018-19 and 2019-20, Curriculum Advisers were recruited in the two disciplinary areas of Humanities and Art, specifically to create activities, events and resources relating to a decolonising of the curriculum. Students were recruited through open call within specific undergraduate courses and paid for their work within these two areas. Over the two years, the two schools have created resources and website-based materials, such as the 'Crossing Cultures' website (http://blogs.brighton.ac.uk/crossingcultures) and the 'DeCol: Decolonising the curriculum' student-staff collective blog (http://blogs.brighton.ac.uk/decolonisingatfalmer/why-were-here/). In the School of Humanities, the focus in 2018-19 was on building resources. In 2019-20, a newly established and largely black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) student-staff collective ('DeCol') set out to achieve some specific objectives, including a student audit of module reading lists, the co-development of a student-staff blog addressing various aspects of the process of decolonising curriculum and a student-led panel discussion event with an invited external speaker and staff.[ii]

At the time of writing, as we move into the third year of the project, the initiative has been renamed the 'Inclusive Practice Partnership Scheme', both to broaden the remit of the project and clarify its long-term focus. It is also being extended to all academic schools, with fifty-three student partners recruited – representative of the undergraduate subject range. It's therefore an excellent time to pause and reflect on our successes – but also on the challenges still to be met – in sustaining student-staff partnerships in the context of existing

structures of HE. In their promotion of a Freirean model of work in partnership, Peters and Mathias (2018, p.58) warn against the reductive nature of partnership work that seeks to appropriate initiatives for neoliberal ends – "*a means of tying students into HE so that they complete their award, pay their fees, and provide feedback that satisfies metrics*". This is certainly a matter of importance to our continuing evaluation of student-staff work-in-partnership practices and, in relation to the decolonisation of the curriculum, we would emphasise that it is a continuous process deserving and requiring long-term institutional support. Decolonising curriculum by means of partnership activity should be regarded as part of a democratic and anti-racist pedagogy – to be sustained as an important working practice, even when its current institutional 'burning-issue' importance has faded away. In this discussion, we highlight positive aspects of and neoliberal and technocratic threats to meaningful work in partnership and a decolonising of the curriculum.[iii] The case study therefore aims to provide recommendations for the next phase of the project and for similar initiatives elsewhere**.**

First pilot phase (2018-19)

Responding to the University's call to participate in a pilot of the Curriculum Advisers Scheme, Dr Vy Rajapillai, leader of the Humanities project, considered how students might variously be involved in decolonising their curriculum. The first students to be recruited for partnerships came from an undergraduate, final-year English Language module – 'World Englishes' – after an invitation to all students on that module. On reflection, we acknowledge that this more selective recruitment from one specific module may be seen as contrary to the Freirean model of partnership, for, when invitation is limited to only a selection of students, staff become gate-keepers to the work of decolonising and consequently retain a position of power in the partnership. In this, the third year of the project, we have addressed this by issuing an open invitation to all undergraduate students in the University, thus extending application to the project to all schools and subject areas.

In the project's first year, the Humanities Curriculum Advisers had three proposals that students and staff jointly tackled: building resources through podcasts and blogs discussing terminologies and activism; auditing the library resources for literature from across the world, especially books by black and ethnic minority writers; and auditing the school's modules in English Language and English Literature. One student focused on building resources and recorded, together with a professor in Applied Linguistics, a podcast on the topic of World Englishes, Translingual Practices, Decolonisation and Post-colonialism. The podcast enabled the student to discuss, with an expert, ideas about World Englishes, any user of which, according Kachru's (1985) concentric model, would be characterised as an 'outer circle speaker of English' (*ibid.*, p.12). This experience not only enhanced the student's personal understanding of matters relating to English language, colonisation and identity, but also helped others to grasp some of the issues involved, as the podcast is now available as a resource for both students and staff. To prepare for the podcast, the student had to become familiar with the work of the expert, even though these ideas had already been raised and discussed in the module. Such a discovery-learning approach (Bruner, 1961) prompted the student to acquire greater understanding of the varied terms used in decolonising work and encouraged deeper personal reflection on and response to questions about colonisation, English language and power, even if these had already been met during previous learning. Sharing of the podcast with the students on the course has both increased

engagement with and stimulated further discussion of related ideas, not just limited to World Englishes, but embracing such wider concerns as lack of inclusion in the English Language and Literature curriculum of the theories and ideas of scholars from post-colonial countries.

Second pilot phase (2019-20)

This successful first contribution to the decolonising of the curriculum resource bank led to the building of a new staff partnership between Dr Vy Rajapillai and Dr Vedrana Velickovic, both lecturers in the School of Humanities, and the establishment of a student-staff collective blog, 'DeCol'. In 2019-20, a number of final-year students, predominantly young women of colour, chose to write dissertations on black British and postcolonial literature. The initial idea was to create a space in the form of a weekly reading group where the students working on these projects could come together and share ideas and books. After an invitation to join the reading group – sent to all students from across the school – and an ensuing meeting at which students shared powerful stories of how the predominantly white and Eurocentric curriculum had adversely affected their experience of the course and their sense of belonging, it was clear that both staff and students were in fact responding to wider structural issues. At this point, our priority was to create opportunities and partnership activities that would lead to meaningful – and long overdue – change. It was important to act on the student feedback, so as to enable students to come up with their own ideas for projects related to decolonising the curriculum and, in so doing, to take ownership of that curriculum and act as co-drivers of change to it (Bovil, 2016). Through the University's Curriculum Advisers Scheme, the students were able to complete a number of decolonising projects while being paid for their work. Efforts to decolonise the curriculum and reform it radically have often been – and sometimes, in places, still are – taken for granted as the responsibility of unpaid and predominantly black and ethnic minority staff and students. As Sofia Akel has recently noted, "*some universities are saying they're doing work, but what they really mean is the students are doing the work for them for free*" (Batty, 2020).

Our early priorities included students' frustrations with a tokenistic approach to decolonising and diversity in module content and reading lists (Bisel and MacDonnell, 2020). Students did not want to see a diverse text/writer/content relegated to the end of a module or to an 'Asian literature' week, as has been the case in of some of their modules. We shared our own reading lists with students and also encouraged them to choose modules that they wanted to audit, using UCL's inclusive curriculum health checklist.[iv] The audit was not only about exposing the dominant whiteness of the curriculum – as our student reported, "*out of all 49 primary readings and film sources 34 were written/produced by white men*" (Francis, Decolonising the Curriculum Reading List Audit Project, 2019-20) – but also about a transformative intervention in terms of enabling students to contribute actively to the co-shaping of the curriculum.

Through the asking of such questions as

- 'Why is it deemed imperative by institutions to study Western philosophy and Enlightenment thought?'
- 'Why is the Enlightenment treated with historical respect when it patterned a history of racialised genocide?'
- 'Why are women/POC/LGBTQ+ theorists/ barely featured in this reading list?'

this project's student-staff partnership proved effective as a means of exploring ways to decolonise curriculum practices and to raise awareness of decolonising across the University.

One student challenged the Eurocentrism of the module by producing an alternative and more inclusive reading list, centralising "*those deliberately unspoken histories*" (Francis, Decolonising the Curriculum Reading List Audit Project 2019-20). These individual projects not only provided us with useful insights into how best to support staff in developing and reflecting on their pedagogic practices, but also enabled us to open a wider institutional conversation about how we can embed decolonising more formally into quality processes and policy. This has been actioned through Dr Jo Hall's development, in collaboration with colleagues, of the University of Brighton's Learning and Teaching Inclusive Practice and Accessibility Policy and associated guidance. From 2021, decolonising activity will become a mandatory consideration within periodic review and re-validation processes.

While we welcome support from "*the institution that is willing to be transformed*" (Ahmed, 2017), we are also aware of some of the challenges of decolonising in a context of existing structures that are echoed in Audre Lorde's famous reminder that "*the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house*" (1984). We are now entering the third year of staff-student partnerships and the University of Brighton is demonstrating long-term financial commitment to this work by funding the Inclusive Practice Partnership Scheme for the next five years. Nevertheless, since decolonising is a continuing process of great importance, we recognise that we must remain alert to possible forms of co-optation, as several publications have warned:

"*… institutions* […] *turn this radical call into a sanitised, superficial project of 'diversification'…*"

"*… and bolstering of the university's global, multicultural identity without grappling with critiquing and transforming the gendered and racialized, colonial structures underpinning higher education*"
(Gebrial, 2018, p.31; Prinsloo, 2016, p.165; Saini and Begum, 2020, p.1; Tuck and Yang, 2012, p.2; O'Neill, 2020).

As part of the Humanities Curriculum Advisers project, students were encouraged to blog about their experience of the systemic structural racism in the UK educational system before and during their time at university. These short entries are an important resource and the sharing of these personal reflections contributes to building a sense of belonging. These statements therefore leave a legacy, disrupting the notion of a transient body of students who stop contributing to decolonising after their graduation. The blog is an open space to all past and current students and we share some of their reflections on the importance of having that space:

"*It is an 'engaging space for me to speak about my frustrations with the current curriculum.*"

"*I had never had any teachers of colour before moving to Brighton…To be a part of these many unveiling projects is to be part of a wider movement to deconstruct our perception of what 'makes' history.*"

> "*Being part of this group seemed to be a natural progression from talking with a few fellow students of colour who agreed that our curriculum was not only overwhelmingly white, but barely questioned.*"

> "[I am] *a final year English Literature student, who never really got to learn about my history or roots as Black-British Caribbean individual or other minority ethnic experiences. If there was anything we learnt about black people as a whole in school, it was the tiresome narrative that all black people were once upon a time slaves.*"

Moving forwards into the next year of the project, we'll encourage students to add their own reflections and we'll celebrate the continued growth of these powerful and important accounts that construct new histories.

The 2019-20 Humanities project culminated in a student-led panel with University staff and an invited external speaker, Hakim Adi, Professor of the History of Africa and the African Diaspora at the University of Chichester. The panel discussed how the terms 'diverse' and 'inclusive curriculum' are frequently used to subsume the more powerful and provocative act of decolonising. Students argued that, under a diverse and inclusive curriculum, modules were often tokenistic in approach – for example, the inclusion of only one week for content 'outside' white/Eurocentric, a minimalist nod to inclusivity that Heidi Safia Mirza has recently described as a 'tourist approach' to the curriculum (quoted in Batty, 2020). The panel also discussed whether 'decolonisation' is a term that has any use or value outside postcolonial countries. The consensus was that it has, since it is not only postcolonial countries that are trying to 'decolonise the mind' (Ngugi 1985): redressing the colonial legacy is an important endeavour of HE. At the University of Brighton, conversations *are* shaping institutional approaches to decolonising, through the development of staff and student training resources in the third year of the project.

Conclusions

The activities undertaken and the resources produced during the two pilot phases of the Curriculum Advisers project have had a positive impact upon the University of Brighton. The project has both demonstrated the successes of student-staff work in partnership and provided the basis of a model for decolonising the curriculum. In the recently updated University of Brighton Strategic Plan (2019-2025), the institution sets out a commitment to inclusive practice and race equity through initiatives such as the Inclusive Practice Partnerships Scheme. This commitment has been strengthened, in part by wider societal concerns following the death of George Floyd and the associated increase in public support for the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and in part by an increasing acknowledgement within the HE sector that "*the university is 'unfit for purpose', the university is need of reform and* [...] *decolonising is one way of doing it*" (Nişancıoğlu, in Bhambra, Nişancıoğlu and Gebrial, 2020, p.512).

Working with students in partnership is frequently regarded as an effective way to resist the excesses of neoliberalism in HE (Peters and Mathias, 2018). Similarly, decolonising has been identified as "*a promise to challenge the neoliberal or market logics that have come to dominate the sector*" (Nişancıoğlu, in Bhambra, Nişancıoğlu and Gebrial, 2020, p.511). If neoliberalism is defined as the extension of competitive markets into all areas of life, then it follows that Freirean work in partnership should be modelled on a non-contractual

arrangement. On reflection, we consider this aspect of Freire's model of partnership as idealistic, not realistic, as we recognise the importance of guidelines of expectation for both staff and students (with clear role descriptions for each) and fully support the idea that students should receive payment for their work in partnership.

Partnership projects that focus on decolonising can clearly be powerful ways to challenge neoliberalism, as long as accompanied by a real commitment to positive change, rather than being used as "*a market opportunity, to refashion the brand of institutions and restructure its teaching practices in ways that put more bums on seats and more fees in pockets*" (Nisancioglu, in Bhambra, Nişancıoğlu and Gebrial, *op.cit.*, p.511). While we are very much aware that discussions about the decolonisation of HE open up a "*set of questions that are too big to confront from within the confines of the university*" (Rao, 2020, p.52), we continue to offer our labour in the hope that the institutions will also show a long-term commitment to confronting their imperial and colonial legacies that have had a lasting and negative impact on the experiences of BAME students.

Our adoption of a Freirean approach to work in partnership can be seen in the ways by which students are selected, trained and involved in activities. Genuine partnership should see HE as a learning community in which students are equal participants, "*sharing leadership and authority with academics and HE managers*" (Peters, in Peters and Mathias, 2018, p.54). To ensure that this does become the case, we recommend the use of open invitation for student participation, transparent selection procedures and training in partnership work, both for students and for academic staff. To conclude, we regard a continuing institutional commitment to race equity as the most important factor in developing effective work in partnership between BAME students and staff, with decolonisation at the core of curriculum and pedagogic development and review.

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[i] Peters and Mathias (2018) refer to the 'domestication' of student work in partnership projects as those which are undertaken by HE institutions in a tokenistic manner, rather than as a way to instigate real action and change. In such projects, power relations between staff and students remain uneven and so 'partnership' becomes a matter of co-option, rather than collaboration. As a consequence, decision-making becomes 'technocratic', increasingly undertaken by those in positions of power, rather than being made democratically with those in partnership.

[ii] We acknowledge the limits of the collective term BAME and the ways in which it assimilates, homogenises and erases a diverse group of people, different lived experiences of racism and multiple forms of oppression.

[iii] The term neo-liberal is used here to refer to the increasing influence of free market capitalism on the structures and operation of HE.

iv https://www.ucl.ac.uk/teaching-learning/sites/teaching-learning/files/ucl_inclusive_curriculum_healthcheck_2018.pdf