

Dreaming to learn together: lessons in decolonial and anti-racist partnership practices

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Racial justice and decolonising are among the most important issues facing contemporary universities, especially in the United Kingdom (UK), with its legacies of imperialism and practices of coloniality. Conversations about them are long overdue in these institutions (Arday and Mirza, 2018; Bhambra *et al.*, 2018; Mirza, 2014) and the urgency to address these issues is present in all university spaces, relations and practices. The struggles of students and staff working toward racial justice and decoloniality take many forms and involve our minds, hearts and bodies. Whatever shape these struggles take, they require learning to work together in new ways. For many of us, student : staff partnerships are a vital part of this work. They offer us different modes of relationship and spaces in which to learn and engage our imaginations. So, it is with hope and dreams for different futures that we offer our reflections to open this very important special issue of the Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change (JEIPC).

In any discussion of anti-racist and decolonising work, context is important as it shapes our experiences and analyses (Mirza, 2014). So, we will briefly share our context with you. We are two academics who have built a feminist alliance across power lines (Carrillo Rowe, 2008). One of us is a Muslim woman of Pakistani origin, brought up in south London, while the other is non-binary queer person who mostly grew up as a white immigrant in a settler colony before moving to the UK twenty years ago. One of us has a background in biomedical sciences and the other in humanities. One is an early career researcher while the other is established. We share a commitment to actively working toward social justice in education and doing that through anti-racist and decolonising practices. Our alliance is political, professional and personal. In 2016, we were brought together serendipitously through our work on the 'Students as Co-Creators' programme at the University of Westminster.

The student body at our university makes us a minority-majority institution¹. About sixty per cent of students identify as Black, Asian or minority ethnic (BAME)². In the wake of the killing of George Floyd in the summer of 2020, Westminster released fifteen commitments “to ensure an actively anti-racist, inclusive and safe environment”³. While it is striving to change, its roots and structures are those of a traditional post-1992 university. Like most universities in the UK, we have degree-awarding gaps, a staff structure that is not representative of the student population and curricula that are variable in their engagements with anti-racist and

¹ This is a reflection of student numbers. We recognise that the situation for staff is quite different and that the vast majority of academic staff in UK higher education remains white.

² Language around these discussions is complex. We use 'BAME' in this instance as that is the classification that official university and higher education statistics use. For our own work, we prefer 'racially marginalised' or 'BIPOC' (Black, Indigenous and People of Colour), as these terms draw attention to the processes of racialisation and power.

³ The full fifteen-point plan is available at: <https://www.westminster.ac.uk/current-students/news/university-of-westminster-publishes-black-lives-matter-commitment-plan>.

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decolonising work. For us, all of these serve to highlight tensions involved in bringing about individual, collective and structural change. Nevertheless, we know – as Lilla Watson teaches us – that our liberation is bound up in the liberation of others (cited in Kluttz *et al.*, 2019, p.1) and that we must work collectively and across hierarchies to create lasting change. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the student : staff partnerships that we have the honour of being involved with. From these relationships, we learn constantly about how to do meaningful anti-racist and decolonising work.

Student : staff partnership is well established in the UK and encompasses many areas of learning, teaching, research and student experiences. Alison Cook-Sather, Cathy Bovill and Peter Felten (2014, pp.6-7) offer a broad definition of partnership as “*a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualisation, decision making, implementation, investigation, or analysis*”. This approach reminds us that partnership is a reciprocal relationship, in which everyone has a responsibility for shaping the project, its process and outcomes. Equally important is the National Union of Students’ *Manifesto for Partnership* (2012, p.8), in which they argue “*At its roots partnership is about investing students with the power to co-create, not just knowledge or learning, but the higher education institution itself... A corollary of a partnership approach is the genuine, meaningful dispersal of power...*”. Here, the NUS reminds us that partnership is not just about individual relationships, but it is also about institutional and structural change, which requires us to disrupt and work across power lines. These understandings of partnership led us to co-develop a set of ‘Westminster Co-Creators Principles’⁴ with students and staff in 2018. What emerged through that experience and in our continuing conversations is that we understand building relationships, focussing on process rather than outcome and creating space for knowledge creation and exchange as keys to unlocking the transformative potential of partnerships for ourselves and our institution. Transformational partnership practices make space for the nuances and complexities of the lived experiences of students and staff. This is especially important for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Colour) students and staff, whose stories and community knowledges have not historically formed part of the normative university structure and the ways in which it values and recognises knowledge creation.

For student : staff partnerships to be powerful, we believe that they need to be situated as explicitly anti-racist, decolonial practices and as spaces in which we collectively uplift and magnify the voices of BIPOC students and staff. Recent events and movements in and out with the university have brought the urgency of racial justice and decolonising back into focus. However, these are not new issues. So we stand with generations who have gone before us, who have dreamt of different ways of knowing and being in the university and the world. Specifically, we are in conversation with the work of Black feminists, critical race theorists and decolonial thinkers and activists. Their tools and analyses, as well as their legacies, presents and futurities, ground and inspire our work in partnership.

Since there are so many scholars and activists whose work offers tools and analyses and there are too many to include in such a short piece, we limit ourselves to sharing four lessons that we have learned through building our partnership work, all of which grow out of

⁴ The principles are available at: <http://cti.westminster.ac.uk/about-student-partnership/>.

our engagements with these scholars and activists. These lessons are by no means the only ones that we need to learn about racial justice and decolonising, but all four underpin our partnership and the work that we do.

Lesson 1: Social justice is everything.

Social justice inspires and animates our work in higher education. It is an orientation, a set of practices and dreams that we work to realise. As Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2018, p.5) argue: “*There is no legitimacy to the field of education if it cannot meaningfully attend to social contexts, historical and contemporary structures of settler colonialism, white supremacy, and antiblackness. Social justice is not the catchall; it is the all*”. Here, we understand them to be asking us to frame all of our work in education around social justice and to engage fully with context and structural issues, especially as they relate to the legacies of coloniality. This is especially important in partnership work, with its emphasis on relationships and students as equal partners in bringing about change. We cannot attend to context and structure without paying attention to what each partner is bringing with them and how they envision change.

For us, social justice is a feminist project that speaks to different aspects of our personal and institutional lives. There are places where our dreams overlap and places where they diverge. We understand this as part of the process of working towards a different higher education. Tuck and Yang (2018) remind us that projects may not always be in perfect alignment. For example, all of our institutions will have varied partnership projects, each of which will understand themselves and their approach to anti-racist and decolonising work differently. It is helpful to reflect on Tuck and Yang’s concepts (*op.cit.*, pp.1-2) of contingent solidarity and an ethic of incommensurability “*as an alternate mode of holding and imagining solidarity. Rather than the goal of political unity with commonly shared objectives, an ethic of incommensurability acknowledges that we can collaborate for a time together even while anticipating that our pathways toward enacting liberation will diverge. Incommensurability means that we cannot judge each other’s justice projects by the same standard, but we can come to understand the gap between our viewpoints, and thus work together in contingent collaboration*”. This approach allows us to foster space for different kinds of partnership work and place value on the lived experiences of participants as they develop their own anti-racist and decolonial practices. Fundamental to this work, then, is to create spaces for conversations about our dreams for social justice in education and how we may enact those differently. Ultimately, social justice is both an imperative and a process. It is both the path we are walking and the place we are going.

Lesson 2: Representation is important, but our work must go beyond it.

Many partnership projects at Westminster have engaged with questions of representation. These are important and necessary projects that bring questions such as ‘Whose knowledge is valued in the university?’ and ‘Whose work do we read?’ into our conversations. Similarly, they have engaged questions of awarding gaps and employability. However, social justice in education is not just about levelling up and getting everyone to the place that white middle-class people hold (Patel, 2018; Patel, 2016). This is because, on their own, projects of representation will not dismantle coloniality or racial inequalities (Mirza, 2014). Social justice in education is about actively dismantling the structures that produce inequities and questioning the foundations of knowledge that contribute to upholding these structures.

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Furthermore, as Joseph Pierce (Small, 2019, 00:50) argues, “*decolonial practice is about doing but it is also about asking how we know the things that we know*”. We need partnership projects that create space for students and staff to gather together, wrestle with these questions and enact different dreams.

There is a question about what it is possible to achieve within institutional frameworks such as universities. In this vein, Manvir Grewal (2021) argues that universities may not be the places to be most innovative while they hold on to traditional colonial tools. Robin D.G. Kelley (2016) also engages with this tension between what can be achieved within institutions and what must be fought for and learned outside of them. He reminds us: “*The fully racialized social and epistemological architecture upon which the modern university is built cannot be radically transformed by ‘simply’ adding darker faces, safer spaces, better training, and a curriculum that acknowledges historical and contemporary oppressions. This is a bit like asking for more black police officers as a strategy to curb state violence*”. If we take the NUS manifesto on partnership seriously, then these questions about power, coloniality and where and how to do this work are fundamental to the conversations that we need to have. These tensions, conundrums and contradictions are where we need to gather to engage in meaningful partnerships that address anti-racism and decolonising.

Lesson 3: We must co-create decolonial and anti-racist atmospheres through building new kinds of relationships with one another and to knowledge.

Partnership work holds the potential to build new types of relationships in which we can bring a full range of affects, experiences and knowledges with us. In effect, we can challenge the structures around how knowledge is created, who gate-keeps knowledge in institutions and which knowledges are valued. So, we are not only creating new relationships with one another, but also new relationships to knowledge. Yahlinaaw (2019, p.9) draws attention to this important decolonial practice when she writes: “*Research is not just about stuffing a jar full of knowledge for the sake of keeping it on a shelf in your basement; research is about putting yourself and your relationships into your work because they are your work*”. The need to engage with decolonial methods and knowledges in the partnership community is clear and Yahlinaaw’s call is unequivocal. Centring relationships is essential for the work of decolonising, as is creating new relationships to knowledge.

New kinds of relationship and decolonial and anti-racist spaces do not just happen. They need to be thoughtfully designed and co-created with one another. In our work at Westminster, we use our ‘Co-Creators Principles’ as a starting point and ask project teams how they will engage these in their work together. We also encourage them to actively articulate their own approaches to working together and what will be significant for them in relation to one another and their projects. One of the tensions of co-creating our principles is that they are not as political as they might have been had the two of us written them ourselves. The next time that we re-write the principles, we will be more intentional in asking the group to consider how we explicitly enact anti-racist and decolonial partnership practices. An example of how this can be done is the work of the ‘Building the Anti-Racist Classroom’

collective (BARC)⁵ and their commitments⁶ for developing principled spaces. BARC's work models an approach that emphasises relational processes while being clearly anti-racist and decolonial in its framing. It provides a model for how to build a different foundation in our relationships with one another.

One of the key things to consider in how we create these new relationships is how we make space for affect, so that students and staff can bring as much of themselves as they wish to the space. Deanne Bell (2018) articulates this in her work on creating decolonial atmospheres. She discusses how she built a learning environment with students in which there was affirming space for their full subjectivities: "*What specifically marks decolonial atmospheres is that this quality of space is where individuals share their knowledge and understanding of social realities and together actively struggle to transform them using their sadness, guilt, shame, anger, desire and love as resources*" (*op.cit.*, p.254). This atmosphere that Bell describes is made possible through sharing and struggling together where there is space for participants' full humanity. Although she does not use the language of partnership, the work she describes exemplifies what can happen when we build partnerships and do so in intentionally decolonial and anti-racist ways. These are the affective spaces and decolonial atmospheres that we are striving for in our own work.

Lesson 4: Anti-racist and decolonial work requires sustained effort and commitment.

The processes involved in anti-racist and decolonial work can be transformative and create different ways of being for us all, regardless of our relationships to the university. They can also be deeply uncomfortable and the struggles have no easy solutions. Decolonising and anti-racist practices require us all to become learners. We must study, reflect and ask difficult questions. We must also learn to sit with the discomfort that arises. The work to dismantle systems that uphold coloniality, white supremacy and racism and to imagine new ways of being in pedagogic relationships with one another necessarily requires letting go of our hierarchies of knowing and listening deeply to one another.

Anti-racist and decolonial work requires conversation and time to attend to complexities and nuance. As Grewal (*op.cit.*) argues, "*Sustainable change can only happen if we approach with caution, being more thoughtful and mindful in our actions and reactions*". Often, partnership work is expected to make quick change and have demonstrable impact within a short period of time. Anti-racist and decolonial work is about dismantling structures that have been centuries in the making. That does not mean we should not demand change and hold ourselves accountable for making change now, but it does mean that we need to be careful about how we do this and who we expect to undertake the work. As the complexities surface, we cannot responsabilize racially minoritised students or staff for creating change. These are issues for the whole university to grapple with, learn from and commit to transforming. We need to be clear about where our ethical duties lie. In fact, we need to commit to thinking deeply about how we understand and decolonise allyship and solidarity to avoid constantly re-centring whiteness in these conversations (Kluttz, Walker and Walter,

⁵ BARC's work is available at: <https://barcworkshop.org>.

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2019). All of this work takes time. Sometimes it means committing to long-term partnerships that can shift and grow as partners have more experiences and develop their understandings. Therefore, we need to develop flexible partnership programmes and learning spaces that can be responsive to the different tempos of the people and projects involved.

The lessons we have outlined are not exhaustive. They are part of a process of continuing conversation and imperfect understanding. This is the nature of doing work that changes us, our communities and our institutions. While in this piece we have highlighted many of the complexities and challenges of engaging in decolonial and anti-racist practices, we want to acknowledge that for us it is also deeply joyful work. As we have grown in our partnership and deepened our understanding, we have laughed, cried, read, thought, written, eaten, walked, talked and analysed together. It has been a space for the full range of our emotions, experiences, thoughts and subjectivities. We hope that you are able to dream and develop spaces for this type of decolonial and anti-racist partnership work in your own communities and universities. The articles that follow in this special collection provide us examples and roadmaps for how to begin this work.

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