

The Education Academy

Decolonising DMU Toolkit

How can we decolonise our pedagogical approach?

Decolonising our Pedagogical approach and Improving outcomes for students from Global majority

It has not gone unnoticed that in recent years in the UK, HEIs have been working on decolonising the curriculum. A background understanding is that global histories of Western domination have dictated; what counts as valuable knowledge, whose knowledge is validated, university curriculum and how it is taught. Therefore, the need to decolonise the curriculum is paramount to allow more inclusive teaching and learning in HEIs. However, despite an emphasis on the need to increase the number of teaching materials by academics from Global South, decolonising our pedagogical approach seems to have fallen below the radar.


Simply including examples/sources from the “Global Southern countries” in our reading list or in our learning materials would be tokenistic, without a true commitment to decolonise our delivery approach as well. In this, reflecting the importance of diversity and inclusivity means a need to implement teaching that consciously positions at the forefront, how we teach what we teach. Thus, decolonising our pedagogical approach is a commitment to self-critique and self-evaluation – from ethnocentric attitudes that maintain white privilege and disadvantage minority ethnic groups (Eboka, 2019). Such a shift in our approach is bound to transform our programmes and improve the students’ learning experience.

How can we decolonise our pedagogical approach?

The list below is by no means exhaustive but would be an excellent starting point.

- 1. Recognising inequalities within your classrooms** – This is particularly important as students may show reluctance to engage in class activities because their mannerisms and way they speak have been stigmatised, or some of these students may also have had limited access to a particular way of thinking or other attributes that universities traditionally celebrate, therefore amplifying the micro-levels in which inequalities play out on their approach to learning. The challenge here is to anticipate how you design the teaching/activities to ensure; inclusivity and that the students’ learning and their success is not dependent on them having prior access to things that are bound to vary depending on ethnic backgrounds.
- 2. Inclusive activities** – Design activities that allows students to draw on the resources they have and develop on the knowledge and skills that they are lacking. Notably, through the course of the class, you are taking the students from where they are and nurturing their development in the direction they need to go, i.e., in group activities, you can get students to connect or talk about personal things, supporting them to put that into dialogue with the different situation.
- 3. Sitting arrangements/group activities** – Group work should be utilised to promote integration between minority ethnic and white students. Students should also be discouraged from clustering along ethnic lines for seating arrangements in classes.

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4. **Assessments and exercises** - These should be designed in a way to help individual students achieve the vital skills required, i.e., with the assignments, we should provide an example of what a good assignment looks like, so they work with guidelines rather than having to make it up as they go along; this shows them how they are going to build, giving them lots of opportunity to practice.
 5. **Avoid ethnocentrism** - We would want to think about what counts in educational process, i.e., is it making this person talk like me or is it helping this person express the content efficiently? We also need to be open to the idea that things might not necessarily work specifically how we have set out.
 6. **Build the students' confidence** - If we believe that racism is to make the 'other' less confident about their ideas or less secured in their belonging, then we need to rethink our idea of promoting belonging in the classroom – this includes learning how to pronounce students' names in the classroom, connecting with them, remembering information about them, affirming when they do something right. Also, it should be foregrounded at the start of the class and repeated in seminar activities that whilst it is advantageous to be fluent in English language, it is not directly proportional to intelligence. This is particularly needed to promote a sense of belonging and engagement with all students.
 7. **Do not make assumptions** - Particularly, we should not make assumptions about who class members are or stereotype them by asking them to represent a particular group. For example, black students are experts on their own lived experience, not the entire 'black' experience or the African experience. It's also important that students feel comfortable and invited to share when they feel able to and not required to.
 8. **Empathy and Identification** - Ultimately, decolonising our pedagogical approach should be one of empathy and identification, it can transform what otherwise would have been an intimidating and even isolating space into a richer experience for the students. We need to put ourselves forward in class not as experts but rather as curators, with a particular positionality and lived experience that really should be foregrounded right at the beginning of a module. For example, since we too were once students, we can share some of these experiences with them - if students see that you can identify with some of their short-comings and are willing and able to offer solutions based on your own experience, it can create an opportunity for students to feel that their positionality and lived experiences are acknowledged. They will be more likely to participate in classwork, it will also improve their confidence and transform their learning.
 9. **Anti-racist classroom** - Making sure that the classroom is a humanising space. If we think of racism as dehumanising, then anti-racism is humanising. It helps students bring themselves into the classroom without feeling vulnerable or exposed (in the sense of fitting in and not feeling singled out) giving them a safe space to learn while still feeling recognised and included. An anti-racist classroom promotes positive team dynamics within the group, builds trust while limiting conflict; this increases success rate and opportunities for academic growth within the students. To ensure an anti-racist classroom, you must be protective, when necessary, i.e., you must correct students who are discriminatory by emphasising how what they have said can be challenging to people's identities and beings.
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All these things can create an environment where which we can promote flourishing. It is however important to note here that we might not be able to completely undo the inequalities because, over the years, I have found that the students who have been privileged in various ways (i.e., from their secondary schools) can do even better, so there will be inevitable gaps between students and their approach to learning opportunities provided. We can only do so much in the classroom, if the society upholds institutionalised racism. However, when possible, you should try to create a space where stereotypes and negative dynamics are temporarily pushed away, allowing all students to be themselves. Notably, universities also need to do more through constant monitoring, and ensuring an inclusive culture for students to integrate, understand each other and be able to trust that their teachers and the university have their best interest at heart.

Adapted from

Eboka, T. (2019). Fostering student engagement with diverse cohorts: A case study of BAME undergraduate students. In S. Bennett and M. Nie (2019). Academics as Changemakers: Addressing challenges in HE Teaching Contexts (Issue 1). <https://www.northampton.ac.uk/ilt/academics-as-changemakers/>

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