Decolonizing Higher Education Pedagogy: From Theory to Practice

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Abstract

While the notion of an anti-racist curriculum is not new, many higher education instructors have not made the transition from a decolonized curriculum to an equally decolonized pedagogy. From a conceptual standpoint, the transition is understood but the actualization of this cyclical process is, at times, not as smoothly executed. Deconstructing delivery is a daunting prospect for faculty, especially for those most invested in the content of their practice. As a result, this paper draws upon both evidence-based practices and the practical application of decolonizing tertiary-level instruction. This article details the experiences of a college curriculum renewal project and the subsequent considerations and changes in practice that ensued in the adoption and delivery of an anti-racist curriculum.

On aborde le défi de passer d'un programme décolonisé à une pédagogie également décolonisée dans l'enseignement supérieur. Il explore la compréhension conceptuelle par rapport à l'exécution pratique de ce processus, mettant l'accent sur les difficultés rencontrées par les enseignants pour déconstruire leurs méthodes de livraison. Le document s'appuie sur des pratiques basées sur des preuves et sur l'application pratique de l'instruction décolonisante au niveau tertiaire. Il détaille les expériences d'un projet de renouvellement du programme universitaire et les considérations subséquentes ainsi que les changements pratiques survenus lors de l'adoption et de la mise en œuvre d'un programme antiraciste.

Keywords: decolonization, higher education, pedagogy, college

Pedagogues aim to be inclusive in their practice; however, intentions and impacts are not always actualized. The crux of this contention lies within the traditional, colonized approaches that many educators have been taught to embrace. Only until a critical shift is made away from these approaches towards a decolonized curriculum and pedagogy can educators claim to be truly anti-racist and inclusive. While there is no sole method of decolonizing curriculum and pedagogy, this study offers research on how I worked toward enacting a decolonizing curriculum and pedagogy within a college setting.

Decolonization Defined

This study details the process of decolonizing higher education pedagogy in a liberal arts program in a Canadian college. However, before embarking upon the various stages of this experience, clear definitions of decolonization are necessary. Decolonization, in the context of curriculum and pedagogy, refers to the identification and deconstruction of Western ideology as an overarching educational frame. Similarly, research by Shahjahan et al. (2021) on varying definitions includes the disentanglement of curriculum and pedagogy from its colonial roots. Coextensively, Shahjahan et al. (2009) describe it as an "oppositional paradigm" (p. 62) that is premised upon anti-colonial thought inclusive of other ways of knowing. These definitions provide the framework for this study in which the process of decolonizing higher education pedagogy is discussed.

Context

This study was undertaken in a liberal arts program at a Canadian college in Toronto, Ontario. During the COVID-19 pandemic, faculty in my department were given release time from teaching to develop a new curriculum for their respective academic English courses. Over a four-month period, I dialogued with colleagues once a week to conceptualize and collaborate on the new curriculum. Meetings were led by a curriculum specialist and our department Chair. As a part of these collaborations, periodically we presented our work to the group for critique and recommendations. After this process, we were required to deliver the curriculum to a small subset of students while onboarding new adjunct faculty in the process.

In terms of students' social locations, they all resided in Toronto but were newcomers to Canada. Their mother tongues were Turkish, Russian, Arabic, Spanish, and Farsi, and as a result, enrolled in our college program to improve their English communications for post-secondary studies or employment advancement. Classes occurred every day, four days a week for four hours online. However, although the newly created courses were primarily for a virtual context, we were expected to adapt these to a face-to-face delivery format later in the academic year. The current study focuses on the delivery phases of the curriculum project. However, from an anticolonial

perspective, there is no one universally accepted system of decolonization, therefore, the process I describe here is not the only approach but is one that I utilized based on research in conjunction with my professional experiences.

Methodological Rationale

To guide this research endeavour, an action study, narrative approach was used as an analytical tool to examine the following problem: How can I, as faculty, make the transition from a decolonized curriculum to an equally decolonized pedagogy? In action or practitioner research, the emphasis is on the instructor as researcher whose inquiry into a problem will not only improve their own professional practice but also have wider implications for society at large (Baker et al., 2004). Interpretations that emanate from this form of research can involve a narrative, self-study approach as these are key to interweaving episteme with phronesis, that is, the bridging of conceptual knowledge with practical wisdom (LaBoskey, 2004; Seiki, 2014). While decriers of action research would contend that 'subjectivity' and validity' are not aligned, practitioner research holds firm that knowledge derived from classroom-based research affirms narrative self-study as a prudent integrated methodological choice (Craig, 2009; Kitchen, 2023; Martin & Russell, 2020).

The relational role between instructor and student warrants self-examination to modify or outright change past practices in the realization of a fully decolonized pedagogy. Feldman (2003) aptly concludes that "for us to change how we teach requires us to change who we are as teachers" (p. 27). Even though well-intentioned educators have utilized conventional 'inclusive' practices (i.e., examples of diverse names on handouts), there remain minoritized students who may feel disconnected from the learning experience (Bailey-Johnson & Alfred, 2006; Ragoonaden, 2016). It was this existential imbalance that not only shifted my focus toward a narrative self-study approach but also fueled this study overall. However, rudimentary self-reflection alone is inadequate in studying a phenomenon unless it is undergirded by a multilayered reflective process that Toledano and Anderson (2020) refer to as descriptive, evaluative, and practical. They extrapolate on this trifecta of phases as "…descriptive reflection on events and our actions and reactions, from our perspective to such events; evaluative reflection, in which we critique, judge and respond emotionally to lived experiences; and practical reflection, which guides our future action" (Toledano & Anderson, 202, p. 307). This approach allows the researcher to use a narrative form of inquiry to deeply analyze the 'problem' on a micro level with macro-level impacts on post-secondary faculty practice.

Methods

As noted in the preceding section, the unit of inquiry selected for this investigation was an action research narrative approach which enabled me as

researcher to reflect on the dissemination of a new, self-generated curriculum. Utilizing literature on self-study, narrative approaches (Creswell, 2014; Ntinda 2018), I executed the research by utilizing written reflective notes, which allowed me to journal about the process. While there were no subjects interviewed for this study, my observations included reactions to curriculum change that resulted in pedagogical transformation. I employed iterative thematic coding to identify themes in my notes and therefore utilized colour coding to visually discern how often specific themes surfaced. I then grouped my notes into broader codes (i.e., themes for this study). Through this reflexive thematic analysis, I extrapolated knowledge from the data gathered. The data was then triangulated for trustworthiness and reliability utilizing Creswell's (2012) criteria for consistency in findings, interpretations, and conclusions.

Triangulation

To ensure the reliability of the identified codes, investigator triangulation was used. Investigator triangulation allows for multiple perspectives to mitigate the limitation of the subjectivity of the primary researcher (Flick, 2004). If convergence occurs, triangulation resultantly increases confidence in the validity of the findings. In so doing, two academic observers were engaged in the study as objective analyzers of the data. They examined the identified themes in tandem with my observational notes. While there was convergence in most areas, they identified additional themes or suggested a rewording which was considered for the final analysis of the data. This was an essential phase in the co-constructed interpretation of the data.

Framing the Process

With a comprehensive understanding of the historical context of a colonized educational system, it was incumbent upon me to create a frame in which to systematically deconstruct my pedagogical practice. To this end, I utilized the following critical questions as a guide which allowed me to conceptualize the multilayered process of analyzing current practices and subsequently actualizing a new decolonized instructional approach and overall philosophy of teaching my courses.

1. Who do I teach?
2. What do I teach?
3. From whose perspective do I teach?
4. How do I teach?

These guiding questions served as a critical lens through which to view my practice. In a self-reflective exercise responding to these initial questions, I quickly realized that there was a disconnect between question one and questions two to four. For example, whereas I was aware of the diversity of my student body, this was not aligned with the perspective I was teaching from as well as the content and methodology I was utilizing. My responses to these questions created the impetus for

this study. While this study is not an exhaustive account of all academic decolonizing processes, what follows are concrete strategies that I employed within my professional context as a result of self-study examination.

Findings

The findings of this inquiry revealed two primary themes: democratizing the classroom, and diversity and inclusion. Instructional practices that were modified or changed as a result of this self-study were categorized thematically and serve as the headings for each proceeding subsection. Each aforementioned theme is discussed as a separate entity with the exception of diversity and inclusion which are grouped together. The most frequent theme that emerged was democratizing the classroom, followed by diversity and inclusion.

Discussion

The following subsections are presented in the order of frequency of emergent themes. The discussion below details how my pedagogical practices evolved as a result of reflexive analyses.

Democratizing the Classroom

Core to anticolonial educational systems is the dismantling of Western worldviews as these relate to hierarchical relational aspects between instructor and learner. Epistemologically, from a traditional lens of learning, knowledge emanates from instructor to student. From this perspective, relationships are vertical whereby the instructor is the foundation of knowledge (Freire, 2000). However, in a decolonized classroom, this top-down relationship is redefined into a reciprocal exchange where teaching is subordinate to learning. Coextensively, Shahjahan et al. (2021) contend that decolonization is "…actualized by regularly critiquing and probing the positionality of knowledge in educational spaces [and] decolonizing environments foster[ed] relational teaching and learning" (p. 86).

Prior to this study, a constructivist approach permeated my practice. Learner knowledge was an essential component in the co-construction of new knowledge, but I concluded that power differentials still had to be addressed in a variety of ways. With respect to group work, for example, I employed a strategy using group interdependence in which each student had a specific role in completing their tasks (i.e., solving a problem). Not all students were on board initially as some had come from colonial systems of education where they expected knowledge to be imparted by the instructor. While buy-in was slow, this group dialogic was repeated throughout the session with most students embracing the exchange of knowledge by the end of the learning cycle.

As the assessor of their work, power relations were imbalanced, so I had to pursue ways to mitigate this. Assessment (i.e., tests and assignments) was an area in which students were able to have meaningful input. Traditionally students were given directives on how to complete each assignment. The element of choice was missing, which for self-directed learners, is essential. In the new iteration of assessments, democratizing the process was enacted by giving way to student opinions on formats of testing (i.e., they selected the method in which their listening tests were conducted). Similarly, they were able to choose their own topics and partners for presentations or were able to present alone. The ultimate decision was theirs in determining the parameters of each assignment. Student reaction was overall positive, and engagement was seemingly increased. The decentering of the instructor in these instances created greater balance within traditional power dynamics between educators and learners, which denoted respect for student input.

Diversity and Inclusion

I have included the themes of diversity and inclusion in concert here as I view diversity as the precursor to inclusion. This investigation brought to the fore that deconstructing Eurocentric power and privilege is something that goes beyond the pages of curriculum. Specifically, anti-colonial practices must permeate all aspects of practitioner pedagogy to be truly inclusive (Shajahan et al., 2009). In attempting to accomplish this, I revisited my initial student-centred methodology and quickly realized that I was transitioning to a human-centred, anti-oppressive pedagogy which in itself is a questioning of the status quo (Mendes and Lau, 2022). This paradigm shift allowed me greater insights into the range of intersectionalities of the individuals whom I was teaching. It was then that I could cull content from my daily lessons that did not adequately represent my students in favour of verbal and written examples that included racial, religious, physical, and gender diverseness. Illustrative of this point was a lesson on personal pronouns (i.e., *she, he, they)* in which students were able to discuss plural identities. Following suit, experts and societal heroes were modified to include a wider range of examples.

The process of decolonizing was an iterative process which required focal attention to utterances and optics. This process constituted a deconstructing of my lexicon. For example, language that reinforced negative stereotypes (i.e., *blacklist, white lies, and black humour*) was stricken from my vocabulary. This also meant that the images I presented had to come under the same scrutiny. In doing a Google search for terms like "thinking" and "intelligent", for example, there were little to no visible minorities or older individuals represented as performing these acts. This was a powerful exercise in understanding the subliminal messaging entrenched in social media that perpetuates damaging stereotypes that further marginalize specific groups. Johnson-Bailey and Alfred's (2006) experiences as black female educators highlight the effects of racialized students existing within oppositional cultures: "…we often live in opposition to the

norm culture in that we inevitably negotiate between cultures… we constantly question our identity against markers set by European standards…[and] values and behaviours that do not mirror those of the majority are often viewed as deviant or wrong" (pp. 53-54). At bottom, not valuing the learning spaces and the lived experiences of our students is analogous to a doctor treating a patient in absentia. If, as educators, we fail to transform, we then engage in the systematic annexing of BIPOC and other underrepresented groups from the social, economic, and educational landscape.

Creating pedagogical space for minoritized groups took root in reading, writing and discussion topics about Ghana's use of plastic bricks as an environmental solution, graduates of Historically Black Universities, and Muslim inventors, to name a few. It was critical to include these examples to highlight diverse representation of achievements and contributions to society. These examples elevate both unrepresented and underrepresented communities by bringing their social histories into the mainstream. As I transitioned to a human-centred pedagogy, I redefined the frame in which I viewed my students as multi-dimensional human beings whose intersecting identities and life experiences dictated the learning space that we occupied. Once that shift had occurred, and modifications were made to my delivery, I observed a greater learner connection to the content which precipitated an optimized learning experience. Notably, the building in of these examples is a work in progress that requires instructor self-reflexivity as the demographics of classroom learners continue to change. In enacting a human-centred pedagogy, I realize there is constant refinement of practice which serves as a gauge for not only academic but also social accountability.

Recommendations

Within the spirit of decolonization, the recommendations made here are suggestions based on this inquiry. It is by no means an exhaustive list of prescriptive behaviour. Instead, it provides a framework for practitioners to consider in their efforts to mitigate power differentials inherent in colonial systems of education. Figure 1 presents both colonial and anticolonial practices as contrastive philosophical paradigms.

As an action research endeavour, this study intended to present viable ways in which to decolonize college-level pedagogy. To this end, the following is a chart highlighting the themes of this study in the form of actionable suggestions for pedagogical change for others within a higher education context (Marom, 2018; Zheng, 2021).

Figure 1

Western/Traditional Pedagogy Versus Decolonized Pedagogy

Underlying Principles	Western/Traditional Colonized Pedagogies	Decolonized Pedagogy
Relationships	Hierarchical - vertical relationships are valued	Horizontal relationships are the focus
Epistemology	The instructor is the foundation of knowledge; lectures are commonplace	Knowledge is co-constructed; instructor is decentered; interactive classes with increased student input; other ways of knowing are central to overarching teaching philosophies
Power	Instructors hold power over curriculum & grades	Empowerment is key; curriculum content is student-driven/negotiated; real-world relevance
Representation	Examples of experts, heroes, knowledge-holders are often Eurocentric/Western; viewed from a deficit perspective	Include other images, examples & voices of marginalized groups
Individual vs. group	Individual skills and group work focus on mastering competence (i.e., presentations)	The individual has accountability to the group (i.e., group leaders and members – learning community)
Values	Value placed on vocal students – silence is seen as a weakness; students with privilege speak more	Value is placed on students who can communicate effectively – quality over quantity
Content	Content is predominantly text-based	Content is presented for multiple means of engagement – Universal Design Principles designed for a range of accessibility and representation of knowledge

Decoloniality in educational spheres is not only applicable to higher education pedagogy but to all levels of education. Practices that disrupt the prevailing systems of power and realign power differentials between instructor and student are not institution or subject-specific. While this study focused on college-level instruction, the findings are generalizable to other contexts, specifically K-12.

Limitations

The most obvious limitation of the study is the context in which this investigation took place. A course where English is both the medium and subject matter creates a major contention in the discourse of decolonization. The global ubiquity of English can be viewed as a neocolonial agent of the 21st century. However, although steeply embedded in an oppressive colonial history, English as a medium can also be perceived as a language of resistance with emancipatory qualities; however, this goes beyond the scope of this paper but warrants academic inquiry in its own right.

The work of decolonizing one's curriculum is indeed a continual process. Although strategies have been discussed in this paper, there are other areas of decolonization to address from an interdisciplinary perspective. Further, additional research needs to be undertaken to include student perspectives on their learning experiences within a decolonized framework. Lastly, Indigenous learners have not been addressed in this paper. To aptly include Indigeneity as a component of pedagogical thought and change, this study needs to be extended to encompass the historical violence experienced by the Indigenous people of Turtle Island, and the intergenerational trauma that has ensued.

Final Thoughts

Decolonizing higher education curriculum and pedagogy requires a disruption of hegemonic norms. This narrative self-study form of action research was a critical examination of my teaching practices and the strides taken to identify and redress anticolonial content and pedagogy. The findings revealed that concentrated effort in democratizing the classroom and enacting diversity and inclusion in curriculum and instructional approaches were core to creating a decolonized learning experience. The merits of this study will allow for greater critical engagement of both novice and seasoned instructors in creating a space that is anti-racist and inclusive of other ways of knowing.

Decolonizing is not just the work of academics. It is an anti-oppressive paradigm that must be applied to all educational milieus and working contexts where power and privilege prevail. If these practices are impeded, the consequence of this inaction will perpetuate the marginalization of communities who will continually feel the ill effects of socioeconomic and spiritual disconnection from mainstream society. In short,

decolonization is not just a conceptual choice but a call to action for all to balance the disharmony in human relationships where power differentials exist.

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