BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Charles, Elizabeth (2019) Decolonizing the curriculum. Insights 32 (1), p. 24. ISSN 2048-7754.

Decolonizing the curriculum

The term 'decolonizing the curriculum' is of high currency in higher education in the UK and in local students' unions at these institutions. This article seeks to give a very brief history and context for why this is fundamental for academic institutions and what role libraries and the scholarly communication sector can play in this movement. I look at why this is so important for black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) and othered (otherly minoritized, e.g. disabled, LGBTQ, etc.) students and what steps some libraries have already taken. One of the themes of the UKSG 2019 Conference was 'diversity and change'; decolonizing the curriculum is exactly that if done correctly. Two presentations from the plenary session provided a good starting point and the article touches on how decolonizing the curriculum may impact research/researchers. It concludes that there is a need for academia to now move past just identifying that there are issues about retention and progression of BAME and othered students and staff, and for both the library and information and scholarly communication sectors to act to address this now.

What is it and why now?

The curriculum in education has always been and continues to be discussed using different approaches and terminology. In the 1990s the focus was on an 'inclusive curriculum'.[1] 'Decolonizing the university' has been in currency since at least 2011, following on from the Malaysian conference on this, with its quest for non-Eurocentric paradigms.[2] The recent prominent 'decolonizing the curriculum' movement can be seen as a continuation of this, originating at the University of Cape Town, South Africa. In what became known as the Rhodes Must Fall movement,[3] students demanded that the Cecil Rhodes statue prominently and centrally on display at that University be removed for what it symbolized and the history it represented in a place of education. This movement was then mirrored in the Rhodes Must Fall Oxford campaign.[4] The theme of questioning what message was being communicated by the voices that were included in canons being taught, and those that are absent, was picked up by the National Union of Students in the *Why is my curriculum white*? film[5] and Mariya Hussain's *Why is My Curriculum White*?[6] in 2015. This movement has been slowly spreading in the UK, and there is an ongoing movement of higher education institutions (HEIs) reviewing their curricula and using the decolonizing lens to do so. Additionally, or in some cases as a starting point, this is being debated by the student body via student unions. Change is being demanded by the student unions in the University of Cambridge; the University of Oxford; the University of the Arts London; Goldsmith University; Keele University; the University of Kent; the University of Leeds; the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS); Birkbeck, University of London; Queen Mary University of London; the University of East London; the London School of Economics; the University of the Arts London and the University of Westminster, to name but a few. The definition from Keele University's Decolonizing the Curriculum Manifesto is preferred as it is all-encompassing of the Institution and its members, be they students or staff:

> '**decolonizing the curriculum means** creating spaces and resources for a dialogue among all members of the university on how to imagine and envision all cultures and knowledge systems in the **curriculum**, and with respect to **what is** being taught and how it frames the world.'[7]

'an ongoing movement of HEIs reviewing their curricula and using the decolonizing lens to do so'

ELIZABETH CHARLES

Assistant Director of Library Services Birkbeck, University of London

So, this, coupled with the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and the National Student Survey, has had the effect of recognizing that the student's voice is important. Many institutions that have undergone TEF have then followed this up with a student experience review consisting of focus groups and asking students what is missing, and this has made students more aware that they do have a say in their own education and should discover that critical voice that education seeks to develop.

I am sure that the mere mention of trying to start a debate about what an academic teaches in their subject discipline, and how, will raise cries of 'academic freedom' being infringed, but that is a discussion for another article.

'students more aware that they do have a say in their own education and should discover that critical voice'

Education institutions

To some in the education sector, 'decolonizing' may seem like just another buzzword that will soon lose currency and recede into the background, but students, via student unions, and some academics are very keen that this should not happen. Over the last couple of months there have been a number of events in London in different HEIs where this issue has been discussed and its importance for BAME students, where continuation and progression rate, as well as the attainment gap,[8] are being scrutinized by the Office for Students. On a wider scale, there is the need to diversify the voices included in the curriculum as well as in those teaching it, and the need to be more inclusive, but on merit, not as a tokenistic gesture or tick-box exercise. I work in the Library at Birkbeck, University of London, a research-led institution where most of our courses (UG, PGT, PGR) are taught in the evening to mature students. I joined the Decolonizing the Curriculum Working Group part of a research centre at Birkbeck. To kick-start the Working Group, we held an event in February 2019 – Decolonizing the Curriculum: what's all the fuss about?[9] – to test the interest and appetite. This echoed a similar event held at SOAS[10] in 2017. Though curriculum review is taking place in the Schools at Birkbeck, the Library has not yet been involved. This review should manifest itself in changes to reading lists and resources required to support the subjects being taught as well as, one hopes, conversations about other alternative sources/resources between subject librarians and academics or researchers.

The issue for students who are other (BAME, LGBTQ, etc.) is that they come to university to learn about a subject they are interested in and look to the academic to be the expert on this: very much the power dynamics that they encounter in middle and high school and that they are familiar with. What happens when they become aware of a lack of visibility of plural voices, or of people like them as having contributed to the subject, or who might have a different narrative to the 'story' being told? What happens to the student when they do not hear their voice at all, or when they do, it is glossed over or framed as a negative? The message that is being communicated is then that you don't belong, or that people like you have made no contribution to this subject area. More importantly, if you as the non-expert want to start a discussion about this lack of inclusivity, how do you phrase this so that it is seen as contributing to a discussion rather than disrupting the orderly flow of the class? Does the student have the confidence to start being critical on a topic they are just starting to understand; and how will it be perceived by the academic and other students? For the majority of 18- to 19-year-olds, I would say that they do not have lingua franca to articulate their concern and probably do not feel, as yet, that part of their participation in higher education is to question what is being presented as the canon they must assimilate in order to progress successfully in their studies. In any case, why should the task of diversifying the voices included in the curricula rest on the shoulders of students who are marginalized or other?[11]

'What happens to the student when they do not hear their voice at all, or when they do, it is glossed over or framed as a negative?'

There is growing research that shows that BAME students in HEIs may have entry qualifications similar to those of their non-BAME peers, but there is still a gap in the quality

of degree attained that can only be explained by a less than neutral effect of race or racism. Meera Sabaratnam, Senior Lecturer in International relations at SOAS and Chair of the Decolonizing SOAS Working Group, also highlighted this issue at the Birkbeck event. The Innovating Pedagogy 2019 report[12] that charts trends in pedagogy/education identified decolonizing the curriculum as a key driver for change in the next ten years. The trend of 'decolonizing learning' and its importance is summed up as follows:

> 'A curriculum provides a way of identifying the knowledge we value. It structures the ways in which we are taught to think and talk about the world. As education has become increasingly global, communities have challenged the widespread assumption that the most valuable knowledge and the most valuable ways of teaching and learning come from a single European tradition. Decolonizing learning prompts us to consider everything we study from new perspectives. It draws attention to how often the only world view presented to learners is male, white, and European. This isn't simply about removing some content from the curriculum and replacing it with new content – it's about considering multiple perspectives and making space to think carefully about what we value. Decolonizing learning helps us to recognize, understand, and challenge the ways in which our world is shaped by colonialism. It also prompts us to examine our professional practices. It is an approach that includes indigenous knowledge and ways of learning, enabling students to explore themselves and their values and to define success on their own terms.'[13]

Libraries

As an Assistant Director of Library Services at Birkbeck, I am interested in how decolonizing the curriculum plays out in academic libraries. Some libraries/librarians have been active in scrutinizing what is on lecturers' reading lists as a first step in raising awareness of race or gender bias in the reading lists for a subject/discipline. The uptake of reading list software in academic libraries has made it easier to capture this data in a timely fashion and then interrogate it for patterns and trends, to feedback to academics and into curricula review discussion. These exercises have been valuable first attempts, with the hope that the findings will galvanize action throughout all curricula, thus mainstreaming it. Indeed, I and colleagues in the E-Services team at Birkbeck Library will, over this summer, be reviewing our key readings data to produce insights reports for departments to take into consideration when reviewing or looking to decolonize their curriculum.

'scrutinizing what is on lecturers' reading lists as a first step in raising awareness of race or gender bias'

Some librarians have been looking critically at the classification scheme they use, the subject terms used for marginalized groups and non-Eurocentric viewpoints on their catalogue. The Dewey Decimal Classification editorial board has recognized this need to decolonize the classification scheme that is used internationally and has its basis in the 18th-century view of the world. It has put a call out on this issue to diversify perspective in revising the Dewey Decimal Classification:

'The Dewey Decimal Classification editorial board has recognized this need to decolonize the classification scheme'

> 'Today, the editors work to adapt Dewey to demonstrate librarians' deeply held values of equity, diversity, and inclusion. We can work together to mitigate bias, both by being cognizant of any system's origins and by making changes to the system.'[14]

Librarians are also, as they start to look critically at the tools they use to organize, label and retrieve knowledge, noticing the terminology used in purchased digital content and how that impacts marginalized groups. As librarians, we are always being asked by our suppliers and vendors to give feedback on the products and services that we subscribe to or purchase. This is an area where, if we want to see change, we can also be active in

flagging up these issues. Some public librarians in Australia, New Zealand and Canada are asking those marginalized groups to work in partnership with them to agree from an indigenous peoples' viewpoint how sections of the library collection should be grouped and labelled.

Goldsmith University Library is working collaboratively with their Students' Union to 'liberate our degrees' and has put this issue front and centre as part of their library strategy to Liberate our Library.[15] Indeed, in the 8 February 2019 *UKSG eNews* 438 Editorial[16] by Marilyn Clarke, she challenges librarians 'to institute real and positive change through social justice work, to self-decolonize'.

The aim to self-decolonize is not limited to simply reading or support materials for teaching, learning and research, but includes ensuring that this critical 'liberation lens' examines all aspects of the pillars that makes the institution what it is: the student, staff, and the organizational cultural constructs and departments by, and in which, it operates. For some HEIs, working towards the Race Equality Charter[17] in conjunction with decolonizing the curriculum has ensured that a systemic analysis of the whole institution and its norms takes place. It is a powerful signal of the institution's intent to no longer ignore the history that episteme is generated from and the role of the educational institution in that narrative.[18]

The aim is not to tell academics what should be included on their reading lists, but to make visible the lack of other voices, thus leaving the subject experts to review their curriculum with a new critical perspective, to investigate and widen their scope on what else should be included. After all, knowledge is not a finite commodity.

A word on the UKSG 2019 conference

My inclusion at the UKSG 2019 Conference panel discussion [recording[19]] was to respond to what we can do, or should be doing, for the publishers and vendors in the audience, to diversify the scholarly communication sector. Academics may say that there are no other voices out there, and so my response to the publishers and vendors was: we will be looking to *them* to start publishing those other voices; the global north is not the entire world and the global south has much to contribute. Publishers should actively support the next generation of diverse authors by mentoring, providing workshops, etc., to facilitate them, making that connection and developing potential, recognizing that those current students going through the education system will be the authors of the future. Likewise, lack of diversity is applicable to BAME senior staff, or the lack thereof, in the scholarly communication sector. The leaky pipeline has been identified by CILIP, SCONUL and other professional bodies. Do something different, make changes, review your organization with a critical lens and map actions to address if not remove barriers that impact on recruitment, retention and progression of the diverse voices that are wanted in this sector.

'Do something different, make changes, review your organization with a critical lens'

Femi Otitoju's presentation on 'Unconscious bias' [slides[20] and recording[21]] was a great introduction to the session of repositioning and embracing change. The two key takeaways that resonated were:

- we are all the product of the society we live in and thus we all have unconscious biases that we need to be aware of and check against

- conversations can take place and progress can be made when we move to a blame-free and evidence-based context.

Nicola Wright's presentation on 'What do we need to change, to change?' [slides[22] and recording[23]] was very pertinent and continued the theme of how to set about implementing change: listening and then talking.

Research output in and research output out

Being aware of our unconscious bias and acting on this also impacts not just teaching and the resources used but more importantly research output, innovation, new theories or insights. If we only allow ourselves to be aware of and be influenced by a very narrow view, rather than a broader perspective, that could result in synergies not imagined being missed as a result. To address this bias to the global north, Imperial College has run geographic/geospatial bias workshops with their researchers, having undertaken a customized Implicit Association Test (Harvard University) on 'whether you implicitly associate good research with countries of high-income, with countries of low-income or whether it makes no difference'[24]; to raise awareness of this and discuss the possible impact on research/ researchers and next steps. At Project Implicit[25] you can test for several different biases.

The point that you are the product of your society also applies to researchers in that you are what you read. If you only ever read research outputs and monographs from global north authors and publishers, then you are not exposed to other approaches, voices and ideas from those in the global south. You never know where the next breakthrough will occur, and other ideas may take you in unexpected directions and towards possible collaborations. Students are taught to stay abreast of their field/subject area, but are we really just saying focus only on global north ideas, publications and research, and that the rest of the world has nothing to offer? Seriously? Is that sustainable, is that just, is that how we want new researchers to see their output having an impact – only on a subsection rather than the whole?

> 'Being aware of our unconscious bias and acting on this … impacts … research output, innovation, new theories or insights'

> 'The point that you are the product of your society also applies to researchers in that you are what you read'

Conclusion

The time is right for decolonizing the curriculum to reinvigorate what is being taught in HEIs. In critically re-examining what is included in the curriculum – the voices, narratives and different sources of knowledge – education could be transformative of both the individual (staff and/or student) and the impact this might have on the subject discipline and society. It will not be an easy transition, but it is long overdue and must be addressed, as well as the lack of other representation and senior representation in the staff of HEIs, scholarly communication and the library and information sectors. Certainly, what we currently have with the leaky pipeline of othered students, othered academic, library and information professionals and scholarly communication staff, is not sustainable, and we cannot continue to ignore this issue. In academia it will require effort on the part of the academics to undertake this work, and the institution to support and facilitate this, to result in a noticeable cultural change; likewise, for senior staff in the library, information professionals and the scholarly communication sectors.

> 'we should reflect decolonization in the content that we purchase or subscribe to and in the tools that we use to categorize and label knowledge'

As librarians, we should reflect decolonization in the content that we purchase or subscribe to and in the tools that we use to categorize and label knowledge (from classification schemes to discovery layers). We need to start articulating the inclusiveness and widening of our requirements to publishers and vendors. In the UK, though university presses are

seeing a slight resurgence and with globalization from a smaller number of key publishers, the publication of academic knowledge is still predominantly of the global north. It may be challenging to find content from the global south, using indexes and abstracts in English, but it is not an insurmountable challenge.[26] For researchers, that broadening of perspective and an awareness of research output from the global south may result in a more significant impact of their research output, collaborative opportunities and new knowledge. We have everything to gain in revealing the different voices and connections that have produced knowledge and in acknowledging that the implicit messages that institutions communicate do impact on the individual, be it staff or student.

'We have everything to gain in revealing … different voices and connections'

Abbreviations and Acronyms
A list of the abbreviations and acronyms used in this and other *Insights* articles can be accessed here – click on the URL below and then select the 'full list of industry A&As' link: **http://www.uksg.org/publications#aa**

Competing interests
The author has declared no competing interests.

References

1. Elizabeth Higginbotham, "Designing an Inclusive Curriculum: Bringing All Women into the Core," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 18, No. 1/2 (Spring-Summer 1990): 7–23.

2. Claude Alphonso Alvares and Shad Saleem Faruqi, eds., "Decolonising the University: The Emerging quest for non-Eurocentric paradigms," *International Conference on Decolonising Our University* (2011: George Town, Pulau Pinang, Malaysia) [Glugor], Pulau Pinang: Penerbit Universiti Sains Malaysia, c2012.

3. Amit Chaudhuri, "The real meaning of Rhodes Must Fall," *The Guardian,* March 16, 2016, **https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/mar/16/the-real-meaning-of-rhodes-must-fall** (accessed 18 July 2019).

4. "Rhodes Must Fall Oxford," RMF Oxford, accessed May 29, 2019, **https://rmfoxford.wordpress.com** (accessed 18 July 2019).

5. National Union of Students, "Why is my curriculum white?," [film funded by University College London] accessed May 29, 2019, **http://www.dtmh.ucl.ac.uk/videos/curriculum-white/** (accessed 17 July 2019).

6. Mariya Hussain, "Why is My Curriculum White?," *National Union of Students [Blog]*, **https://www.nus.org.uk/en/news/why-is-my-curriculum-white/** (accessed 18 July 2019).

7. Keele University, "Keele Manifesto for Decolonising the Curriculum," **https://www.keele.ac.uk/raceequalitycharter/raceequalitycharter/keeledecolonisingthecurriculumnetwork/ keelemanifestofordecolonisingthecurriculum/** (accessed 17 July 2019).

8. Universities UK, "Universities acting to close BAME student attainment gap," **https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/news/Pages/Universities-acting-to-close-BAME-student-attainment-gap.aspx** (accessed 18 July 2019).

9. Jan Etienne, "Decolonising the Curriculum: What's all the fuss about?," *Events Blog*, **http://blogs.bbk.ac.uk/events/2019/02/11/decolonising-the-curriculum-whats-all-the-fuss-about/** (accessed 18 July 2019).

10. Meera Sabaratnam, "Decolonising the Curriculum: What's all the fuss about?," *SOAS Blog*, January 18, 2017, **https://www.soas.ac.uk/blogs/study/decolonising-curriculum-whats-the-fuss/** (accessed 18 July 2019).

11. Martha Tesema, *"Why We Need to Talk About—and Recognize—Representation Burnout,"* February 1, 2019, **https://advice.shinetext.com/articles/we-need-to-talk-about-and-recognize-representation-burnout/** (accessed 18 July 2019).

12. Open University, *"The Innovating Pedagogy 2019 Exploring new forms of teaching, learning and assessment, to guide educators and policy makers,"* report, January 2019, **https://iet.open.ac.uk/file/innovating-pedagogy-2019.pdf** (accessed 18 July 2019).

13. Open University, *"The Innovating Pedagogy 2019",* 3.

14. Violet Fox, "The Dewey Decimal Classification Needs You!," *Next* (blog), *OCLC*, 21 May 2019, **http://www.oclc.org/blog/main/the-dewey-decimal-classification-needs-you/** (accessed 18 July 2019).

15. Goldsmith University Library, "Liberate our Library," accessed May 29, 2019, **https://www.gold.ac.uk/library/about/liberate-our-library/** (accessed 18 July 2019).

16. Marilyn Clarke, "Liberate our Library: social justice and need to change," *UKSG eNews* 438 Editorial, **https://www.uksg.org/newsletter/uksg-enews-438/liberate-our-library-social-justice-and-need-change** (accessed 18 July 2019).

17. Equality Challenge Unit now part of Advance Higher Education, ECU's Race Equality Charter (REC) aims to improve the representation, progression and success of minority ethnic staff and students within higher education, **https://www.ecu.ac.uk/equality-charters/race-equality-charter/about-race-equality-charter/** (accessed 19 July 2019).

18. Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, "The dynamics of epistemological decolonisation in the 21st Century: towards epistemic freedom," *Strategic Review for Southern Africa* 40, no. 1 (May 2018): 16–45, **https://www.up.ac.za/media/shared/85/Strategic%20Review/vol%2040(1)/Ndlovu-Gatsheni.pdf** (accessed 18 July 2019).

19. Plenary panel discussion on "Repositioning and embracing change in the scholarly communication sector," https://tv.theiet.org/?videoid=12918, UKSG Conference 2019 (accessed 18 July 2019).

20. Femi Otitoju, "Unconscious Bias," slide presentation, https://www.slideshare.net/UKSG/unconscious-bias-141007093, UKSG 2019 Conference (accessed 18 July 2019).

21. Femi Otitoju, "Unconscious Bias," recording of the presentation, https://tv.theiet.org/?videoid=12916, UKSG 2019 Conference (accessed 18 July 2019).

22. Nicola Wright, "What do we need to change, to change?," slide presentation, https://www.slideshare.net/UKSG/what-do-we-need-to-change-to-change, UKSG 2019 Conference (accessed 18 July 2019).

23. Nicola Wright, "What do we need to change, to change?," recording of the presentation, https://tv.theiet.org/?videoid=12917 UKSG 2019 Conference (accessed 18 July 2019).

24. Harvard University Implicit Association Test for Imperial College London "Pride and Prejudice in Higher Education – countering elitist perspectives in Imperial College London," accessed May 29, 2019, personal correspondence.

25. Project Implicit, https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/selectatest.html (accessed 18 July 2019).

26. Fran M Collyer, "Global patterns in the publishing of academic knowledge: Global North, global South," *Current Sociology* 66, no. 1 (2018): 56–73, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0011392116680020 (accessed 18 July 2019).

Elizabeth Charles
Assistant Director of Library Services
Birkbeck, University of London, GB
www.bbk.ac.uk/library/
E-mail: e.charles@bbk.ac.uk

ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9043-4480