

Decolonisation in learning development

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HOW TO BE A LEARNING DEVELOPER IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Critical Perspectives, Community and Practice

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Chapter 15

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15

DECOLONISATION IN LEARNING DEVELOPMENT

Georgia Koromila and Edward Powell

When asked to share my ‘decolonising practice’ in supporting international students, I was confronted with a sobering realisation: helping students excel within the established structures of a Western Higher Education institution felt more ‘colonising’ than not...

The overarching question becomes: (How) can we reconcile decolonising LD practice with the mandate of facilitating student success?

The concept of ‘decolonising the curriculum’ (DtC) has been gaining traction in higher education (HE) worldwide since 2015, following the Rhodes Must Fall protests at Rhodes University, South Africa, and the University of Oxford, UK. It is a complex idea whose meaning remains contested and evolving, and which intersects with other efforts to democratise HE. DtC calls for changes not just to curricula, but also to teaching practices, learning spaces, research processes, and institutional policies. As such, it is relevant to academic teaching staff, and also to many ‘third space professionals’ (Whitchurch, 2013), including Learning Developers. Given their comparatively close involvement in student learning, Learning Developers in particular ought to consider their potential contribution(s) towards DtC.

DtC proceeds from observations that HE is marked by the same racialised inequalities that pervade the sector’s wider social contexts, and which are a legacy of European colonialism. Universities in Europe, North America, and Australasia dominate HE worldwide, with their – predominantly white – research staff having access to significantly greater resources and publication opportunities than those based in the Global South. As a result, the perspectives, experiences, and idioms of white Europeans and their settler descendants

are overrepresented in global knowledge production, to the extent that all others are disqualified as legitimate forms of knowledge. In many respects, therefore, the global dominance of Eurowestern thought has little to do with its epistemological merits but is instead a product of structural inequalities that have persisted beyond the dissolution of direct European colonial rule, a process that itself remains incomplete.

As a corrective, DtC demands that HE institutions (HEIs) place colonial histories at the centre of their curricula and challenge the simplistic distinction between Eurowestern rationalism and non-Eurowestern irrationalism, according to which only the former constitutes ‘real’ knowledge. This effort remains subject to debate and misrepresentation, predominantly in the STEM subjects, where the status of science itself is often regarded as being in question (see Roy, 2018). Advocates of DtC, though, maintain that DtC is not about ‘abolishing science’ or removing white voices from curricula. Instead, DtC calls for existing curricula to be expanded to include a more diverse array of voices, ideas, and perspectives, including those of thinkers from the Global South (Dennis, 2018). This expansion will then bring the university’s colonial entanglements into sharper focus.

Notably, though, a curriculum or HEI may never be fully decolonised, because the historical relationship between colonialism and Western HE is potentially too deep to ever be undone. Universities helped rationalise colonialism (Bhambra, Dalia and Nişancioğlu, 2018) and the neoliberal logic underpinning contemporary HE is incompatible with the aims of decolonisation (Adebisi, 2020; Dhillon, 2021). The end goal of DtC, therefore, might be better understood as a ‘decolonising’ rather than a ‘decolonised’ curriculum – that is, a curriculum in an ongoing process of decolonisation that will likely never be complete. Alternatively, a ‘decolonial’ curriculum might be a better way of articulating the goal of DtC. By this we mean a curriculum that ‘decolonises’, that contributes to wider efforts to overcome the ongoing legacies of European colonialism, by training students in ways that do not perpetuate those legacies. The question, then, becomes what a decolonial curriculum looks like, which, in turn, invites reflection on its implications for LD.

LD’s Role in DtC

Scholarly accounts of curricular changes being made under the aegis of DtC indicate key skills students will need to succeed in a decolonial curriculum. Many of these skills are already familiar to Learning Developers. For example, if students are encouraged to work with non-academic partners, such as local community groups, the required skills will include groupwork and engaging non-academic audiences. Elsewhere, reflective practice takes a central role, as reported in Dache et al. (2021), where students are encouraged to explore their place within local and global networks of unevenly distributed power,

and when facing cases of injustice and systemic oppression. Such exercises take students across disciplinary boundaries, notably into history, sociology, and anthropology; they will need support with learning to work between wide-ranging disciplines. Meanwhile, this process may challenge many students' deep-seated understandings of their subjects, of what defines knowledge, even of themselves as producers of knowledge. In addressing how unjust social circumstances influence knowledge production, DtC challenges what Dennis (2018, pp.192–3) calls 'the unmarked scholar', whose knowledge is untainted by their position within the ongoing history of colonial inequality. This challenge can be disorienting and traumatising, and can provoke resistance (Edwards and Shahjahan, 2021). Learning Developers can help ease this experience, given the centrality of doubt and discomfort to the process of critical analysis. A decolonial curriculum, though, might demand an extension of this aspect of critical analysis, a reminder that it applies to all ways of defining knowledge.

Perhaps the most challenging skillset for students to learn, therefore, will be the ability to recognise diverse ways of defining and expressing knowledge. Many of the pedagogical innovations described in the DtC scholarship introduce ways of claiming and expressing knowledge that are demonstrably different to Eurowestern conventions (see Pete, 2018; Cicek et al., 2021; Dache et al., 2021; Pratt and Gladue, 2022). Encountering these non-Eurowestern forms of knowledge will require students to remain open-minded, curious, and self-reflexive, and to be ready and willing to reconsider some of the most fundamental precepts of Eurowestern epistemology, including the possibility of knowing for sure. If Learning Developers are to support students with revising these precepts, then they must also be willing to do so themselves.

Learning Developers must consider, therefore, the case for decolonising LD itself. Sibanda (2021) describes current LD support – what he calls 'Academic Literacies', following Lea and Street (1998) – as an 'apprenticeship to Western rhetorical norms'. Bohlmann (2022, p.1) echoes this critique when asking whether Learning Developers can be decolonisers if their 'role is to develop academic literacies by training students to conform to dominant reading and writing conventions' and 'to support students to succeed in the curriculum as it is'. These are pertinent questions, but the LD role they both describe is closer to what Lea and Street (1998, p.159) call 'academic socialisation' rather than 'academic literacies'. Lea and Street define the former as a process of 'induct[ing] students into a new "culture", that of the academy ... whose norms and practices have simply to be learnt to provide access to the whole institution'. This approach figures academic writing as 'a transparent medium of representation' that students just need to learn. In contrast, academic literacies figures academic writing as laden with values that are often at odds with students' own values, identities, and experiences, which become difficult to convey in academic writing. Academic literacies, therefore, aims to help

students develop a writing style that is both academic and able to express those values, identities, and experiences. Alongside improving students' sense of belonging at university, this approach promises to broaden the scope of acceptable academic writing in terms of both content and style. Understood this way, academic literacies appears in fact to have much in common with DtC.

Another useful framework can be found in Perry's (2020, p.307) 'pluriversal literacies', a concept that questions the primacy of writing found in the academic literacies approach and, instead, encompasses 'a much broader understanding of relational human experience'. This concept seems to align with a decolonial curriculum that emphasises the multifaceted ways humans produce and communicate knowledge, and assigns value to wide-ranging skills and competencies. Accepting such a premise would broaden the scope of LD, to include helping students appreciate, use, and develop the full range of explicit and/or implicit knowledge and skills they possess. In practice, this approach could manifest as flipping perceived weaknesses into strengths. For example, international students may mention that 'English is not my first language', implying a disadvantage in writing; however, knowing more than one language can alternatively be viewed as having access to unique insights from a linguistic intersection. Similarly, finding 'academic writing' unsettling can mean that one is best situated to critique it; or mature students expressing desire to 'relearn how to be a student' can, instead, build on their rich experience. In a similar vein, Yosso (2005) argues that students from marginalised communities carry valuable cultural capital that enables them to enrich and/or challenge established perspectives in academia. It is, therefore, important that Learning Developers encourage students to draw from their unique backgrounds, to contextualise literacy as practice and reframe their own contribution to knowledge. Opportunities to do so seem likely to increase, as DtC agendas gain traction.

Decolonising LD?

The extent to which Learning Developers have progressed towards a 'literacies' approach, as opposed to mere 'socialisation', is open to question. For one thing, this push must overcome institutional hurdles, such as the institutional marginality of Learning Developers (Sibanda, 2021). What influence we have on agendas in our institutions must be fought for and gained. Currently, there seems to be very little demand from academic colleagues for Learning Developers to help with decolonial design, possibly due to misconceptions about our role and potential contributions to the DtC agenda. To increase our recognition and reach, we can start building individual collaborative relationships incrementally. Another path is to showcase LD in institutional committees as a scholarly field that can add pedagogical value. If disciplinary silos are serving to reinforce traditional conventions, and interdisciplinarity can be a

step towards challenging these, then Learning Developers have a unique vantage point to act as translators for students and academic practitioners alike, and thus enable the cross-pollination of ideas among disciplines at the institutional level.

Another barrier arises from the institutional and student expectations regarding the purpose and role of LD. Indeed, revealing the ‘hidden curriculum’ is a long-standing premise of how LD can enhance the chances of success for students from marginalised backgrounds, by clarifying the structures, rules, and expectations for students entering academia. Although this practice enhances sense of belonging, retention, and progression, it can equally work to normalise the status quo, thereby directly conflicting with decolonial goals. From a similar standpoint, Bohlmann (2022, p.2) asks: ‘If our role is to support students to succeed in the curriculum as it is, can we really be part of the DtC movement?’ This question illustrates the contradiction LDs must contend with, echoed in the distinction between the ‘socialisation’ and the ‘literacies’ approach (Lea and Street, 1998). As pragmatic needs and institutional requirements inevitably condition our practice, we must examine to what extent the academic literacies approach can underpin Learning Developers’ practices, as opposed to academic socialisation. We can use this tension and associated sense of dissonance as a tool for metacognitive analysis of our own praxis. Such reflexive questioning is required for any true progress in the DtC path. Other conditions include personal reflexivity, awareness of context(s), and student buy in.

How can we, then, envision our practice changing through the decolonial lens? Bohlmann (2022, p.4) identifies two preliminary steps for Learning Developers:

The first key area is knowing ourselves: decolonising starts with reflecting on our role as practitioners within a colonial higher education system. Where do we stand? And can we help our students find their own position within, or in relation to, this value system? The second key area is getting to know our students: decolonising means acknowledging our students as individuals and actively including them through rapport and community building activities.

In line with this suggestion, Learning Developers should look inwards and question our assumptions and how these manifest in our practice. Awareness of our biases and privileges as individuals and as a professional community is a condition for acknowledging our positionality and bringing this recognition into our interactions with students. The role of LD bears great potential for rapport building, particularly as it is distanced from the role of assessor and its associated imbalanced power dynamic. Exposing our positionality in our tutorial interactions may create the space for students to (re-)contextualise the

tutor–student relationship; allow them to question authority; encourage them to explore their own cultural capital; and identify more explicitly their agency. The potential of small-group tutorials for decolonisation is discussed by Hassan (2022) in the context of South African HE as a way to support students from disadvantaged backgrounds to develop their sense of belonging and achieve academic success. These tutorials are described as ‘a decolonised space where students are made to feel accepted and treated in a humanistic manner’ (Hassan, 2022, p.81). Such ‘decolonised spaces’ might involve small practical measures like learning students’ names and discussing their individual challenges, while also nurturing an inclusive learning environment (Bohlmann, 2022; see also Lee et al., 2017). Such measures can increase students’ sense of belonging at university and, by extension, their sense of empowerment and ability to offer unique contributions towards the DtC goals.

One area with potential for decolonial practice in LD is that of academic integrity, where we can already see concrete evidence of work that challenges Eurowestern epistemological assumptions. Magyar’s (2012) study with a group of international students in the UK showed that the concept of academic integrity has much deeper links to cultural values and epistemological traditions than has been usually assumed when offering referencing tutorials. The author distinguishes between referencing, that is, the mechanics, and attribution, that is, the principles, of academic integrity. By approaching the ‘avoiding plagiarism’ theme from an attribution standpoint, therefore, we can make the concept of academic integrity easier to understand for students of diverse cultural backgrounds. Taken further, broadening academic integrity and embedding it in values rather than practical rules is exemplified in the Indigenous Academic Integrity approach introduced at the University of Calgary (Pratt and Gladue, 2022): a conceptualisation of academic integrity founded on indigenous paradigms, based on the values of relationality, reciprocity, and respect, which takes academic discourse and knowledge attribution beyond the Eurowestern ideas of ‘ownership’ and ‘rights’. In addition to following this example to enrich our approach of academic integrity, could we theorise other academic skills through similar indigenous paradigms?

Another area of debate is the use of English as primary language for instruction and writing in HEIs where English is not the native language of many students. The primacy of English has been viewed as a pervasive colonial remnant that perpetuates Eurowestern hegemonic structures (see summaries in Kubota, 2022; Parmegiani, 2022). The embedded inequities in use of English have implications Learning Developers should consider. For instance, Hassan (2022) argues that use of native language(s) in tutorials benefitted black students as it enhanced their sense of belonging. Parmegiani (2022) advocates for linguistic diversity in the classroom: introducing the mother tongue in instruction and writing was shown to succeed in both decentring English and helping

students appropriate English as a tool for academic success and socioeconomic mobility. As use of language is central in LD practice, there are alternatives we could be exploring. For example, should we encourage students to use source materials in languages other than English? Is there a benefit from exercising writing in more than one language? Taken further, similar questions can apply to the primacy of academic English. From an academic literacies perspective, students should be supported in challenging conventions and experimentation, but how much might that conflict with pragmatic needs?

More broadly, Learning Developers can contribute to the DtC goals by examining (and changing) our implicit 'othering' structures, behaviours, and choices that may reinforce colonial ideals. These can be found everywhere: for example, in the configuration of our spaces; the names of our buildings; the role models we promote; the classifications of academic skills in our webpages; the examples we use to illustrate concepts; our technologies; the ways we acknowledge, measure, and reflect upon impact; and our agendas in teaching and research. All of it contributes to the establishment and reproduction of norms around what matters. We posit here that there are always ways to challenge this 'everyday colonial' practice, starting from simple things like diversifying our examples or asking students to think of some that speak to their experiences; setting up spaces that offer opportunities for multiple types of social interaction; co-producing our learning objectives in taught sessions; or being flexible with time and availability in online, face-to-face, or hybrid environments. Questioning the underpinnings and implications of our choices can only take place through reflexivity in our routine practice.

As a final note, DtC presents a framework for revisiting our professional structures and LD identity. The roots of our discipline in widening participation and deficit models of socialisation and inclusivity have set out goals that, although challenged, remain influential. If we want to set out new goals that align with decolonising visions, then what might these look like at the strategic level? One important step would be to acknowledge the whiteness of the demographic composition of our profession and ask who is currently motivated to become a Learning Developer. Do we foster diversity in recruitment? And how can we make diversity efforts meaningful (as opposed to tokenistic representation)? There is an argument to be made for internationalisation and connections outside the Anglosphere, as well as the potential for incorporating indigenous voices, as a meaningful step for expanding LD's relevance, although it is up for debate whether that would mean we have 'decolonised' LD. Another area we should examine is our research agendas. What themes are we promoting and funding? What do we publish in our journals? Where else do Learning Developers publish, and what audiences do we reach? (How) do we include student voices in our work? Considering our role in the decolonisation context offers potential for an agenda with global scope that can enrich the voices of the LD community.

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