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Chapter 1

Decolonising the Higher Education Curriculum: Engaging with Liminality

Anamika Twyman-Ghoshal, Omar El Masri, Adeela ahmed Shafi, Samuel Copland, & Acheampong Charles Afriye

'Decolonising the Curriculum' (DtC) is now a well-established phrase in the vernacular of higher education institutions (HEIs). The recent movement can be traced back to the 2015 Rhodes Must Fall campaign at the University of Cape Town, South Africa and the parallel campaign at the University of Oxford, United Kingdom (UK), where students rebuked the colonial legacies in HEIs and called out the predominantly 'White' syllabi they were taught. In the 2014 film 'Why is My Curriculum White?' produced by University College London as part of a broader National Union of Students campaign[1], students expressed the many ways that their education was incomplete, with critical elements missing, omitted, and excluded from their curriculum. It is important to note that colonialism has taken many forms over time, with many different impacts on higher education. Rizvi et al. (2006) highlight that understanding the legacies of colonialism helps overcome ahistoricity, recognising that identity and difference should not be reduced to essentialist terms or binary logics (see also Bhabha, 1994). Nevertheless, it is clear that students in these movements conveyed their frustration with the way in which monoculturalism was normalised and reproduced in their educational experiences. At the centre of these calls is a recognition that education is intrinsically linked with power, functioning both as a tool of empire and colonial thought, and therefore a critical space to expose and challenge the ongoing impact of colonialism. One of the key sites to expose and challenge the impact of colonialism, to initiate resistance and transformation, is the higher education curriculum.

Across the UK, many Universities initiated DtC campaigns, developing guidance documents and resources such as discipline-specific toolkits[2] and Decolonisation zines[3]. One of the most well-known efforts came from Keele University, where a student and staff 'Decolonise Keele Network' produced the 'Keele Manifesto for Decolonising the Curriculum' (KMDtC, 2018). The

Manifesto outlined eleven principles to decolonise the curriculum effectively, suggesting a blueprint for a sustained and serious commitment to democratising the university. The Manifesto called for a wholesale rethinking, reframing, and reconstructing of HEIs that reexamines mainstream academic literacies and transforms curricula to be more inclusive and reflective of multicultural communities. Despite the early momentum of the DtC movement, 'decolonising' has increasingly become a buzzword, part of a shallow trend, that is often reduced to virtual virtue signalling on university webpages or conflated with equity, diversity, and inclusion initiatives. And although colonial thinking, at its core, fosters an environment where discriminatory attitudes towards individuals from different cultures and backgrounds can thrive (Said, 1978), DtC is a broader call for transformation. Institutional indolence, however, has not stopped academics from embracing the need for DtC. Indeed, many of the resources and toolkits available on university webpages are produced by committed staff and students, who have made meaningful efforts in DtC. Efforts which are often not supported with adequate time and/or funding and can come at a high personal cost in terms of fraught discourses and high workloads. Moreover, such DtC work undertaken at the academic grassroots level remains largely unrecognised, seen as insignificant in the bureaucratic machinery of HEIs and at the periphery of what is considered prestigious academic practice. It is here that this book has its origins.

We, the co-editors, Adeela ahmed Shafi, Acheampong Charles Afriyie, Samuel Copland, Anamika Twyman-Ghoshal, and Omar El Masri, come from diverse disciplinary backgrounds, life experiences, and theoretical approaches. Although our paths to engaging in decolonising work were different, we came together around a shared desire to move DtC from idea to action. Our unique journeys provide some context for the origins of this book. Throughout most of her academic career in education, Adeela has shied away from acknowledging and inserting her background into her professional work. More recently, and especially with this book, she has foregrounded her background and the lens she uses to view the world. As someone who came from an immigrant background, born and brought up in the UK as a British Asian woman, who happens to be Muslim, she knows the feelings of marginalisation and not fitting in and uses these experiences as she develops her decolonising initiatives. Acheampong is of Black-African heritage, a Christian man born and raised in Ghana, a former British colony. A professional accountant and subsequently an academic in the fields of accounting, finance, and financial

technology, educated in Ghana and the United Kingdom, he navigates diverse perspectives and attitudes toward institutions, wealth, power, hierarchy, and value systems, all of which drive his decolonising efforts. Samuel is dual-heritage British and Malaysian-Chinese, born and raised in England, spending much time in South East Asia. A professional marketer for many years, Samuel has become a marketing academic specialising in understanding the role of storytelling in culture and knowledge generation and transfer. Anamika identifies as a ‘third culture kid’ (Pollock, Van Reken, & Rollock, 2010), what Bhaba (1994) called a ‘cultural hybrid’. She is a mixed-race woman of Indian and Polish heritage, who grew up, studied, and lived in countries across Europe, Asia, and North America, all and none representing her home. Her research in criminology centers on power and social harm in a globalised world, which led her to examine and engage in decolonising the problematic foundations, legacies, and exclusions of academia. Omar, a diasporic Lebanese Druze scholar, draws on his community’s traditions of solidarity amid historical and political persecution. His interest in the lived experiences of people in divided cities like Beirut, Belfast, and Washington, D.C., what Hage (2021) describes as “an entanglement of multiple realities” (9), informs his research in peacebuilding, urban studies, and colonial legacies. Raised between Lebanon and Saudi Arabia, and educated in the UK and the Americas, his experiences shape his academic work. Together, as editors, we recognised the value of diverse scholars sharing their decolonising experiences and learning as a source of inspiration and support.

Motivated by sharing knowledge across disciplinary divides, this book invited authors to contribute their perspectives and innovative approaches, to describe their practice of identifying, challenging, dismantling, and/or replacing hegemonic canons and approaches that silence and exclude non-mainstream voices. This work brings together scholars united by their commitment to DtC and to cross-disciplinary learning. None of us claims to be experts in DtC, instead, we see our work in this space as situated in a state of liminal transformation to decolonise higher education.

The Liminal Space of Education

Education, as hooks (1994) reminds us, is not a neutral act but a practice of freedom—a radical space where hierarchies can be dismantled and new worlds imagined. Educators have the unique

91 power and opportunity to shape the learning environment and influence students' critical
92 engagement with knowledge. This power is evident in decisions about curricular design,
93 classroom arrangements, and whose voices are centred or marginalised. Educators determine
94 which perspectives are validated and how knowledge is framed—choices that can either
95 empower or alienate students (Freire, 1970). For DtC, incorporating diverse voices into the
96 curriculum can disrupt Eurocentric paradigms and encourage broader and more inclusive
97 thinking (Dei, 2016). Conversely, the uncritical reproduction of existing knowledge and power
98 structures—through biased curricula or authoritarian teaching styles—can perpetuate inequalities
99 and alienate students (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Educators have the potential to extend their
100 influence beyond the classroom, shaping students' perceptions of themselves and their agency.
101 Modelling critical thinking and humility, both in and outside the classroom, can inspire mutual
102 respect and intellectual curiosity. In contrast, those who assert authority without reflection may
103 reinforce oppressive dynamics, discouraging students from engaging deeply or expressing ideas
104 (Biesta, 2010). By facilitating dialogue and debate, educators can create a safe space for students
105 to challenge and refine their thinking, fostering a collective learning process (Freire, 1970).
106 Ultimately, how educators wield their power shapes students' critical consciousness and their
107 ability to challenge societal inequities.

108 The concept of liminality comes from the Latin 'limen', meaning 'threshold'; a term used by
109 Van Gennep in 1909 to refer to the process of transition. According to Van Gennep (2019),
110 liminality has a tripartite structure, starting with a separation from the traditional, moving
111 through transformation, and culminating in metamorphosis. Liminality describes a
112 transformative process that occurs over time and space. The concept of liminality was used in
113 postcolonial theory, particularly by Bhabha (1994), to refer to the space in-between, at the
114 borders of different cultural traditions and historical periods, spaces where change occurs. More
115 recently, Cousin (2006) and Land, Meyer, and Baillie (2010) have applied the concept of
116 liminality to transformational learning, suggesting three distinct states: preliminal, liminal, and
117 postliminal. Inspired by these works, we suggest that DtC is a transformation that manoeuvres
118 through these three states, where decolonising transformation oscillates between traditional and
119 emergent knowledge. This book is structured around these tripartite liminal states, used here as a
120 framework to exemplify decolonising practices in higher education.

In the chapters that follow in Part Two, the authors document their innovative approaches to decolonising the curricula in their respective fields. The variety of approaches in this section, reflect different states of liminality. The decolonisation process begins with the often unseen 'soft work' of confronting implicit biases and reflecting honestly on positionality and privilege. This preliminal state involves recognising how identities and (educational) experiences shape interactions with students, colleagues, as well as the institution and the discipline. Educators begin by reflecting on how their identities and experiences influence their teaching, consider whose voices they amplify or silence, and consider how they can actively use their positions to revise curricula to challenge systemic inequities (Twyman-Ghoshal & Lacorazza, 2021). The early chapters in Part Two capture this preparatory work, through case studies that model preliminal practices, including creating spaces for students to examine their own biases, designing learning experiences that honour lived realities, and critically examining conventional knowledge. These accounts reveal decolonising as a dual commitment—to the ongoing ‘soft work’ of reflexivity and the ‘hard work’ of transforming teaching practices to include high impact learning and community partnerships (Twyman-Ghoshal & Lacorazza, 2021). Through these reflective narratives, contributors illustrate experiences of ongoing learning and unlearning.

The liminal state actively reimagines classrooms as participatory spaces, fostering critical engagement with missing and omitted knowledge through active dialogue and co-creation in the classroom. The later chapters in Part Two, suggest ways that classrooms have been reimagined as dynamic, participatory spaces where learning becomes a collective effort. This shift aims to move away from traditional didactic models—often rooted in hierarchical authority and individual competition—toward an environment where mutual exchange and critical inquiry are encouraged. In these evolving spaces, educators and learners navigate transformation, still oscillating between the preliminal and liminal states. In the context of decolonising practices, educators play a crucial role in ensuring that both academics and students are welcomed, challenged, and empowered to reflect on subjectivity, ontology, epistemology, and social imaginaries. By embracing these types of inclusive, participatory approaches and recognising epistemic diversity, learning spaces are not only transformative and empowering but also align with the values of social justice. In the words of hooks (1994), “the classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy”(12). In the chapters that illustrate work in the liminal

state of DtC, different approaches used to cultivate inclusive, dialogic, and emancipatory educational spaces are expounded.

The transition from liminal to postliminal states occurs with a shift to sustaining decolonial practices through shared, collective responsibility. The classroom, as a site of ‘radical’ possibility, becomes a microcosm of the potential for broader institutional and societal change. DtC, we argue, is not a destination but an ongoing process requiring both individual accountability and collective action. This state calls educators to move beyond reflection and into sustained practice, embedding decolonial principles into every aspect of teaching, learning, and the expansive space of academia. In this book, we invite educators, students, and institutions to embrace their shared responsibility in dismantling colonial legacies through collaboration, critical inquiry, humility, and a commitment to justice.

The Structure of this Book

Part One opens with a chapter by Adeela ahmed Shafi, that examines the colonial underpinnings of knowledge generation, with particular attention to the entrenched inequities within higher education institutions as generators and ‘custodians’ of knowledge. The focus here is on confronting epistemic injustice, decolonising research methods, and the structural inequalities of research funding and publication systems.

Part Two presents the work of academics and students who have initiated efforts to decolonise the curriculum[4]. The first three chapters in Part Two illustrate engagement at the preliminal state. Wilson Poon’s chapter on the physics curriculum, outlines some of the struggles of moving from imparting knowledge to engendering wisdom in a University classroom, outlining the benefits of his decolonising efforts in a thermodynamics module. Sam Louden-Cooke and Natalie Jester’s chapter on international relations examines why a discipline which is steeped in colonial history needs to decolonise. In their chapter, they outline some of the ways they bring non-Western theories into their teaching. This is followed by a chapter on the influence of government policy on higher education curriculum, knowledge production, and pedagogical power by Alison Scott-Baumann and Duaa Jamal Karim. Here, the authors critically examine the epistemic coloniality with a focus on the UK government’s counter-terrorism policy, the

180 ‘Prevent’ framework and its impact on pedagogy in HEIs suggesting methods for collective
181 epistemic repair.
182
183 The following eight chapters in Part Two provide a range of examples of engagement in the
184 liminal state. Yvette Putra’s chapter examines the Eurocentric nature of the ‘Tree of
185 Architecture’, using it as a foundation from which to decolonise architectural design and history
186 education. In their chapter on decolonising Business Schools, Acheampong Charles Afriye and
187 Samuel Copland argue that an ongoing process of critically re-evaluating and reconstituting the
188 systems and mechanisms of power, knowledge, and ways of being is essential. In this chapter,
189 they pose a series of critical questions in the form of a dialogic exchange to engage Business
190 Schools and their stakeholders. The focus then shifts to researching American literature with a
191 chapter by Jessica Mure, who discusses how and why her approach shifted in her doctoral work,
192 from using postcolonial theory to an active decolonial analysis. In his chapter on the computer
193 sciences, Jordan Allison provides insight on how curricula can be transformed to equip students
194 with an understanding of the colonial legacies embedded in modern technology. Kevin Lala,
195 Jasmeen Kanwal, and Kalyani Twyman’s chapter discusses their experiences of introducing and
196 teaching a specialised module dedicated to ‘The Science of Race and Racism’ in an
197 undergraduate biology programme. The DtC project described by Anamika Twyman-Ghoshal,
198 Omar El Masri, and Billy Dalton in the following chapter, reflects on the rewards and challenges
199 of trying to embed a processual decolonising approach to transforming a criminological theory
200 module that encouraged students and staff to work collaboratively. The final two chapters in Part
201 Two relate to high impact learning activities and meaningful community partnerships that begin
202 a shift towards the postliminal. Kimberly Ellen Hall and Tom Spooner take readers into the
203 studio-classroom of an illustration course where they engage in a conversation on how they
204 deconstructed and subverted the top-down pedagogic hierarchies through decolonising
205 assignments. The final example is from history, where Christian O’Connell discusses his
206 decolonising assessment that took students outside the classroom, one which grappled with the
207 legacies of slavery that engaged students to work with external partners and community groups.
208 Together, all the chapters in this section, provide a rich resource of practical ideas that can be
209 used across disciplines to meaningfully embed strategies for DtC.
210

In Part Three, the focus shifts to reflect on the collective responsibility of decolonising work, looking towards the postliminal state. Adeela ahmed Shafi explains that DtC efforts by academics and students require support, leadership, and direction from those at the top of the institutional hierarchy, emphasising the role of university boards and councils. This is followed by Acheampong Charles Afriyie, Sam Copland, and Adeela ahmed Shafi's chapter where they reflect on their work of introducing a three-pronged framework that aimed to engage the whole higher education institution in DtC work. They elaborate here on the importance of a nuanced and multifaceted approach to addressing the complexities of decolonising work and developing curricula that are inclusive, equitable, and representative. The last chapter concludes with lessons learned from across the contributions and some final thoughts on how to move towards a decolonised future for higher education.

We hope that in this book, the reader will find inspiration on how to start DtC, as well as ideas on how to develop and deepen their decolonising practice. With this work, we sought to collectively answer the question of *how* decolonising the curriculum can happen by bringing together a community of scholars across the academic divides to tell the stories of their efforts and experiences. We hope that this publication allows us to begin a sustained practice of engaging in learning across disciplinary boundaries, learning from those rich and varied liminal spaces where decolonising transformation is happening.

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[1] The video is available on the University College London's YouTube channel at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dscx4h2l-Pk

[2] See for example the DtC Toolkit for STEM by Manchester Metropolitan University, available at https://www.mmu.ac.uk/about-us/professional-services/uta/reducing-awarding-gaps/decolonising-the-curriculum-toolkit or the Decolonisng the Science Curriculum principles set out by St Andrews University, available at https://inclusive-and-anti-colonial-practice.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/files/2022/04/Decolonising-the-science-curriculum-working-to-inspire-change-in-the-science-education-community.pdf

[3] See for example University of Bristol Decolonisation Zine at https://bilt.online/in-review-decolonising-bristol-university/

[4] In the spirit of a decolonising approach, this book relaxed some of the rigidity of the publishing process, where individual chapter authors chose the terminology, spelling, and style of their work.