

## **Decolonising learning development through reflective and relational practice**

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### ***Abstract***

The Decolonising the Curriculum (DtC) movement questions the very values we take for granted as learning developers. If our role is to develop academic literacies and support students to succeed in the curriculum as it is, can we as learning developers be decolonisers? This opinion piece argues that we can and should. It outlines where we can integrate the DtC agenda into our work through reflective and relational practice. The piece stresses the importance of reflection about our role as practitioners within a colonial higher education system and of relating to our students as individuals by learning their names and breaking barriers to participation with rapport and community building activities.

**Keywords:** decolonising the curriculum; reflective practice; relational practice; inclusion; academic literacies.

### ***Introduction***

The Decolonising the Curriculum (DtC) movement questions the very values we take for granted as educators. It questions our identity, the knowledge we have internalised and are committed to reproduce, the way we teach our students and how we assess them (Shahjahan et al., 2021). In so doing, DtC also questions our role as learning developers. Certainly, our work provides an important access point to higher education, particularly to students from non-traditional backgrounds. Working specifically with international students, my professional practice as a learning developer often is about explaining why we – in the European-North American context – value such things as intellectual ownership, persuasive writing and active learning. Learning development to me then is akin to a translation practice: I translate academic culture and conventions and support international

students to better meet the expectations of the (Western) academy. But I grapple with the limitations and duplicity of this remit, especially in light of the DtC movement. As long as learning development aligns with and extends the (official and hidden) curriculum, it replicates colonial values such as individualism, competitiveness, striving for originality, the preference of the written over the spoken word – just to name a few. In other words, we provide students with the key to access, but not the tools to ‘dismantle[,] the master’s house’ (Lorde, 1984, p.106).

Our role as learning developers within the DtC movement then is contradictory. If our role is to develop academic literacies by training students to conform to dominant reading and writing conventions, can we at the same time be decolonisers? 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 opinion piece argues that we can and that we should. While we might not be in a position to change the structures within which we work, there are two key areas where we can make a difference in our everyday practice: first, by reflecting on our identity as educators, and second, by acknowledging our students as individuals.

**‘Decolonising the teaching and learning in AL [Academic Literacies] starts with the AL practitioner - the person in the mirror’ (Brian Sibanda)**

Recognising the person in the mirror means becoming aware and accepting our inherent ‘complicity in coloniality’ (Sibanda, 2021). It might not be a position we have chosen consciously as it is dictated by our role within higher education. Yet this position is real and acknowledging it is to recognise the academic literacies paradigm as an ‘apprenticeship to Western rhetorical norms and ways of thinking, writing and talking.’ (Sibanda, 2021) We would do well not to attach any judgement to this set of arrangements as it will only end in repressed feelings of guilt that serve no one. Coloniality is a reality in higher education, and we happen to be part of it.

Self-awareness and reflexivity about who we are as educators is an opportunity to move the DtC agenda into learning development. Within their respective contexts of the US and Canada, Lee et al. (2017) and Page (2021) advocate for the development of intercultural pedagogy, a practice that begins with a recognition of how we have been shaped by our own academic culture and subject disciplines. Page argues that a central component of this is ‘understanding personal biases and adjusting . . . ways of teaching and relating to

be increasingly sensitive to diversity'. Such reflexivity can bring about an important shift in the relationship to our students, even if 'the basic structure of the curriculum is maintained' (Page, 2021a).

Knowledge about ourselves, our disciplines and culture aside, there is also a lot of mileage in the way we approach our students. Do we see them? Do we address them respectfully? Do we embody acceptance?

**'People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel' (Maya Angelou)**

This often-cited quote speaks to DtC in learning development because it relates to the impact we have as people, no matter what we teach or try to develop in our students. Learning development is a deeply relational practice. It is not (just) about us; it is about our students. If we see students as individuals, they will respond positively. Moreover, seeing students for who they are beyond national stereotypes (Choi, 2019) and racist stigmas (Owusu-Kwarteng, 2020) sends a powerful message, not just to them but to other students and educators.

As learning developers, however, it can be difficult to get to know our students. We are not in the same position as subject lecturers who can build relationships with their students over the course of a semester or an entire degree programme. Our encounters are more transient; we might only meet a student once. Still, investing in getting to know students is an important step in understanding their challenges and identifying appropriate strategies to support them (Page, 2021b). One way to do this is to learn their names, a simple act shown to foster inclusion and a sense of belonging (O'Brien, Leiman and Duffy, 2014). Online pronunciation tools and wider reaching campaigns, such as name safety pledges and initiatives to unearth naming practices in different cultures can assist in consolidating such initiatives (University of Warwick, 2022).

Many of our students come from backgrounds that rob them of confidence or simply do not prepare them to navigate the (Western) higher education environment. As educators who occupy a similarly marginal position, we know how difficult it is to break down barriers to participation. Engaging marginalised students and making them feel part of what is going on in the classroom and the academy more widely needs careful planning. For those of us

who have the opportunity to teach groups of students, this can be achieved by establishing an inclusive class environment. Lee et al. suggest a list of approaches that can support this even in one-off classes or tutorials, for instance, sharing our own learning experiences and providing opportunities for students to share theirs, not assuming that all students come from the same learning tradition and giving 'time for quiet writing and organization of thoughts before open discussion begins' (2017, p.103) for speakers of English as a foreign language. Breaking down barriers also means improving the relationship between different groups of students. Arkoudis (2010) developed a framework to reduce the distance between domestic and international students in Australia by listing steps to scaffold interaction from using initial icebreakers to facilitating learning communities. At the University of Glasgow, a colleague and I managed to create a community among dissertation students from diverse backgrounds by adding informal elements, such as live podcasts and writing incubators, to our more formal classes (Bohlmann and Ross, 2021). Integration does not just happen; it requires us to develop an awareness of who our students are as individuals and the conscious removal of barriers standing in the way of their full participation in higher education. For some of this work we need to reach out and create wider networks at our institutions and beyond. The Anti-Racist Curriculum project in Scotland is an example of a cross-institutional initiative that through collaboration has been able to produce its first outputs and guidelines that can be consulted by educators across the sector (ARC, Advance HE, 2021).

Can learning developers be decolonisers? Some questions should never be answered 'No', and this must be one of them. Above I have outlined two key areas where we as learning developers can enact the DtC agenda, even if we have no sway over the official curriculum or only see our students sporadically. 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. These initiatives and conscious tweaks to our practice might not look like much and will go unnoticed if we do not shout about them. But not all things are quantifiable and that is a good thing too. It might just be that we are a little bit happier with the person in the mirror.

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