“Decolonising Curricula: Strategies, Approaches and Teaching Tools”

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The Royal Historical Society’s recent report on “Race, Ethnicity and Equality in UK History” has revealed the extent to which History curricula in UK institutions of higher education focus on white histories and Eurocentric approaches to the past, and the barriers such historical approaches pose to promoting racial and ethnic diversity and inclusiveness. But while there is a burgeoning scholarship on decolonizing curricula, its focus is largely theoretical, and hence does little to explore the practicalities of undertaking such a process, including approaches, initiatives and teaching tools. The aim of this paper is therefore to begin to address such a lacuna through both highlighting the decolonizing initiatives the Department of History at the University of Liverpool has recently begun and proposing a series of relatively simple measures that departments in History and related disciplines can take to help decolonize not just their curricula, but their learning environments.

In response to the RHS report, the Department of History at UoL is undertaking a range of measures to decolonise its curriculum, promote diversity and inclusivity and implement authentic forms of assessment. These include:

* the development of new modules and topics for our first-year students that focus on non-Western histories and which encourage student uptake of modules on non-Western history/the global South in years 2 and 3;
* a review of the diversity of module reading lists;
* a review of the experiences of BAME History students at Liverpool;
* a series of brown bag lunches, attended by staff, PGRs and PGT students, on “Decolonising the Curriculum”, along with a working group;
* and a range of other activities.

**Emily**

In the curriculum audit project that I undertook in conjunction with the project intern, Sophia Henry, we wanted to move past the question of “diversity” and really tackle “decolonisation”. Where a diverse curriculum may, for example, represent all ethnicities, genders, sexualities and regions of the world equally, a decolonised curriculum moves beyond this, to examine power relations and, to paraphrase Manjeet Ramgotra, to question and unlearn who is traditionally considered to hold authority in producing knowledge.[[1]](#footnote-1) Placing these principles at the centre of our approach not only enabled us to reach important conclusions, but also helped us to consider creative solutions.

This project took three areas of the curriculum to audit: author demographic in reading lists, subject diversity in modules and seminars, and assessments; it is the first two of these that I will focus on today. Author demographic looked at three compulsory first year modules, while the subject audit took a cross section of modules across all three undergraduate years.

Tackling the demographic of authors in reading lists reveals *who* our students are encouraged to read, and gives a very clear message about whose work is considered valuable, which is an issue directly linked to levels of inclusion for BAME students.[[2]](#footnote-2) To take this further than “diversity”, we wanted to look beyond the demographic to ask whose work is considered valuable? and whose work is chosen to teach certain subjects?

Of the modules assessed, 71% of the reading lists comprised of white authors, compared with 10% BAME authors; and 72% comprised of men, compared with 22% women. There was one non-binary author featured. (I could quite happily take all of the time I have discussing our methodology for categorising race and gender here, but if anyone has any questions at the end I’d be happy to answer them). Whilst the racial breakdown remained largely the same when only required readings were considered, the gap between female and male authors increased from 50 percentage points, to 58.

Whilst these findings quite clearly indicate a diversity problem, it is essential to ask *why* a reading list may lack in diversity. Module convenors are of course responsible for their reading lists, yet such lack of diversity does not necessarily point to a module convenor who has disregarded BAME, female, trans or non-binary scholars; wider issues in the academe need to be considered. For example, research has shown that BAME scholars find their choice of field limited by assumptions that they would only study their “own” history. This is clear when we looked at seminar breakdowns in modules. In “The Global History of the Present”, for example, an award-winning, team-taught first-year module that traces the global genealogies of contemporary events relating to race and empire, such as Brexit and Black Lives Matter, and that was introduced as part of the decolonizing initiatives of the History department at Liverpool, the 27% BAME authors that made up the overall reading list jumped to as high as 75% when seminars on the topic of race were assessed in isolation.

Let’s assume this is a scarcity problem; that there are less BAME scholars working on, say, medieval Europe, than in other areas, like slavery studies. How can modules that teach in a field dominated by white male scholars take on the project of decolonisation of reading lists? One solution that has been adopted in the “Global History” module is to include students as part of this conversation. As a whole, students should be encouraged to look at a field of scholarship and think critically about *who* has carved out this field and *how* this shapes what we know about it. What counts as an “academic” source? Who has traditionally had access to writing such works? *Not* addressing an overwhelmingly white male dominance in scholarship does nothing to help those students who aren’t white, or male, to see themselves as having a place in the field. Rather, encouraging such conversations will not only make students better critical thinkers, it will create the space for students of all backgrounds to see their own potential value in the discipline and assert themselves within the next generation of scholars.

Similarly, in our subject audit, we wanted to ask not only *what* was being taught in seminars, but *how.* Therefore, we distinguished between, firstly, the teaching of the *subject* (women, people of marginalised genders, people of colour); secondly, the teaching of categories of analysis (gender, race); and , finally, *what* or *who* was centred in such teaching.

The merits of asking *how* topics are taught is clear: of those seminars teaching histories of people marginalised by gender and/or race, only 43% used primary sources created by the marginalised subject. Once again, this is a question of how we engage our students with this issue. If we are teaching, say, Indian history through documents produced by white men and women, are we talking to our students about why this might be the case?

Further, while 23% of seminar topics addressed histories of people of colour, 92% of those taught such histories through European contact, i.e. colonisation and slavery. The problem is therefore not only a simple lack of diversity, though of course, this is not to criticise histories of slavery and colonialism. Indeed, Deana and I both work on colonial India, and Deana has some spectacular teaching methods that centre Indian agency that she will discuss shortly. But we cannot deny that a curriculum that teaches histories of people of colour almost exclusively in relation to European history is problematic. The solution to this is to not only diversify the curriculum, but to pay attention to what such diversification looks like.

At the same time, it is important not devalue certain areas of research, or worse, deem them irrelevant to the project of decolonisation. This is why looking at how categories of analysis are taught is so important. There are of course, areas of history in which white men are the overwhelming focus, and questions of race and gender are just as applicable here. Rather than taking whiteness and maleness as the default, we should be asking, how was masculinity and whiteness constructed? what was the impact of this? Indeed, out of the 92% of seminars that addressed gender history, just 8% looked at masculinity, and no seminars we reviewed addressed whiteness. Teaching gender and race must not be regarded as the sole responsibility of scholars who teach the histories of those traditionally marginalised in these categories.

**Deana:**

As Emily has already suggested, decolonising curricula entails more than simply including marginalised voices in module reading lists, or exploring the nature and legacies of modern colonialism – it also necessitates, at some level, exploring the ways in which we have *all,* regardless of our race, ethnicity, class or other attributes, been reconfigured by the effects of colonialism (albeit in disparate and highly unequal ways), or been transformed, in the words of trauma scholar Michael Rothberg, into subjects who are ‘implicated’ in its legacies. These include, most notably, various forms of structural violence, racism and injustice. Since such forms of violence are collective, this means, as decolonisation scholar Natalie Avalos argues, ‘we have a collective responsibility’ to undo its effects ’*together*’.

In light of such concerns, as an Indian historian my aims in teaching about the nature of modern colonialism and its global effects are [**slide 6]**:

* To disrupt perceptions of indigenous/non-Western knowledge as ‘primitive’ or ‘irrational’;
* To foreground indigenous/non-Western peoples as experts on their own experiences and knowledge systems;
* To create opportunities through which students both individually and collectively learn how power operates to marginalise but also how marginalised peoples have taken such power back;
* and to help students to see their own power, both to deconstruct and reconstruct the socio-cultural system in which they live, and with it to effect change.

I am going to give you an example of how I strive to fulfil such aims in my teaching by looking at a second-year module that I teach called “The Indian Freedom Struggle(s)” [**slide 7]**:. This module, which recruits approximately 35-40 students a year, charts aspects of the global history of nationalism, in particular its indigenisation in colonial India and development as a tool of resistance to British rule. But rather than taking a teleological approach to its subject matter, by examining the origins and development of a nationalist movement, I encourage students to explore some of the many, often competing, ways in which freedom came to be conceptualized in colonial India, and the various movements that arose from such conceptualisations, ranging from ethno-religious nationalisms (such as “Hindu” nationalism) to movements that transcended conceptions of the nation (such as the Indian communist, anti-caste and women’s movements) or that viewed it as antithetical to Indian conceptions of society, self-hood and the collective good (such as Rabindranath Tagore’s anti-nationalism, or Muslim cleric Mahmood Mamdani’s conception of “composite nationalism”).

The module thus fulfils my aims through, firstly, not only challenging perceptions of indigenous/non-Western knowledge as ‘primitive’ or ‘irrational’, but contesting the purported ‘civility’ and ‘rationality’ of British/Western knowledge, which it does by giving students the opportunity to engage with a wide variety of primary texts by Indian authors, ranging from histories, newspaper articles, speeches and manifestos, to correspondence, poetry and fiction. Such an approach, secondly, inevitably foregrounds Indians as experts on their own experiences and knowledge systems.

Thirdly, the module creates opportunities through which students both individually and collectively learn how power operates to marginalise but also how marginalised peoples have taken such power back through the authentic forms of assessment [**slide 8]** it employs: group “press conferences”, given at the start of module seminars, in which 3-5 students assume the roles of Indian historical actors and attempt to convince members of the “press” (their peers) of the justness of their respective struggle for freedom; and a series of “newspaper articles”, in which students assume the guise of late-nineteenth/early twentieth-century Indian journalists and/or historical figures and explore issues relevant to module themes.

Such activities, collectively, help students to see their own power, both to deconstruct and reconstruct the socio-cultural system in which they live, and with it to effect change. So, too, does the inclusion of Indian student/youth activism as a key focus, and the nature of seminar discussions, in which students are invited to compare and reflect on ideas explored in the module to their own life experiences and to consider possibilities for change.

It is perhaps the fact that the module is, as one student noted in their feedback on it [**slide 9]**, “different to anything I have ever studied . . .”, that encourages students to take it. While initially somewhat hesitant about the novel forms of assessment, most appreciate, as another student stated in their feedback, undertaking coursework that “provides the chance to be creative”. To help boost student confidence and encourage creativity I give students the opportunity to sign up for a “press conference” group of their choice; I also meet with each group at least once to offer guidance and suggest potential resources and read drafts of “newspaper articles”.

The impact of the module on students is clear, firstly, in their enthusiasm for its assessment formats. Students carry out often extensive amounts of research for both assessments. They also display considerable innovation in their choice of subject matter and individuals to embody, such as male students, for example, portraying prominent Indian women. In the case of “press conferences” they work hard together, in addition, to create an ‘authentic’ press conference experience. As they note in their feedback, students appreciate the ways in which both assignments “get you to position yourself in the context” (namely colonial India). They particularly enjoy the “press conferences”, an assignment that they feel not only “makes for a fun experience” but is “interactive” in nature.

The module’s impact is also clear in students’ reflections on what they have gained from it. Students report that the module is “inspiring” because it “open[s][their] eyes to new understandings of the past” and makes them “critically assess [their] own understanding of the world”. Students also appreciate the “different perspectives focused on” and the opportunity of “understanding a culture so different from ours”. BAME students, in particular, welcome “the [module] content not being so white” and the ways in which the seminar format “includes everyone and sets a lovely working atmosphere and a ’safe’ environment to speak in”; for one student the module even made them feel “comfortable in [their] own skin” in a way they had previously struggled to.

We’d just like to wrap up, now, by saying that it is obviously easier, as Emily has suggested, for academics in some areas of expertise to begin to work towards decolonising their curricula than it is in others. But what we are proposing is that it is possible to develop a set of tools and approaches to teaching that can be implemented regardless of area of expertise. This entails looking at what, who and how we teach. The History department at Liverpool is certainly a long way from the efforts that have been taken at places such as SOAS in negotiating with the history of empire and its ongoing legacies, so for us this is very much a project in its early stages. But as the feedback from some of our students at Liverpool suggests, even the small steps that we have so far taken can make a big difference to the teaching and learning environment for students.

1. Paraphrased from Dr Manjeet Ramgotra’s keynote speech, “Decolonizing the Curriculum” webinar, Villanova University, 9th September 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Royal Historical Society, *Promoting Gender Equality in UK History: A Second Report and Recommendations for Good Practice*, (November 2018), p. 72; Royal Historical Society, *Race, Ethnicity & Equality in UK History: A Report and Resource for Change*, (October 2018), p. 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)