

The Race and Ethnicity Hub

Decolonising the curriculum

Jenny Douglas:

Thank you for inviting me to speak, and I'm really pleased to be speaking during Black History Month, as there's quite the debate about whether we should, or we shouldn't have a Black History Month. I think it's really important to focus on the lives and the achievements of Black people here in this UK.

And in by way of introduction, I will also say that my parents were Jamaican, and they came to the UK in the '50s after the Windrush generation. And they came because they felt that they would have-- it would be a better life for them, and a better life for their children. Sadly, many, as we know, of that Windrush generation were actually betrayed by the British government.

So that's the backcloth in this Black History Month for me. A little bit about myself, I'm a senior lecturer in health promotion. And as Sas said earlier on, all of my professional life actually has been devoted to addressing inequalities in health, starting off with a role I had training in health and race in 1982.

From that I've kind of developed work around intersectionality and health, and around Black women's health and well-being. And I've developed really a Black feminist epistemology in relation to intersectionality and health. Over the last sort of year to 18 months, I've been leading work in our department, health, well-being, and social care, on decolonising the curriculum. And that is what I'm going to be speaking about today.

So, I'm going to give a brief kind of history and context of decolonising the curriculum. I'm going to look at some of the definitions and some of the contentions. I'm going to say a little bit about the BAME, whether you want to call it the attainment gap or the awarding gap. And I'll say a bit about that, talk about what universities are doing, and then conclude, really, with talking about the OU inclusive curriculum tool that we have developed.

So, I will start, history and context. The most recent history of decolonising the curriculum has been around student movements, asking that the curriculum actually reflect their experiences

and their voices. There was, and it kind of reactivated a movement that perhaps started two decades ago around decolonising the curriculum, and making sure that the curriculum reflected Indigenous populations and communities from the global South.

So, in 2015 we have the successful Rhodes Must Fall campaign at the University of Cape Town in South Africa, which actually resulted in the statue of Cecil Rhodes being removed. We have since had a Rhodes Must Fall Oxford campaign. And that was kind of reignited more this summer following the global kind of protest movements. And it's interesting that apparently Oriel College have decided to remove the statue of Rhodes. Now that could be connected with the fact that at last, at one of the Oxford Colleges, University College Oxford, they at last have a Black master, Professor Baroness Amos.

So, we also had a number of initiatives which were very much student led in the UK. Why isn't my professor Black? Which was a University College London life panel discussion. An NUS film, which is, Why is my Curriculum White? In 2016, Why is my professor still not Black? And I think we could have that in 2020, why isn't my professor Black? And so we had a movement which spread across the UK. And in May 2019, NUS and Universities UK produced a document, "Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic Students Attainment at UK Universities Closing the Gap." And I'll say a bit more about that later on.

So there have been many discussions and debates about what we mean by decolonising the curriculum. And decolonising the curriculum is very much contested, so I'm going to give you a few definitions. Keele University, their definition is, "Decolonising 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 respect to what is being taught and how it frames the world."

SOAS, their focus was on two things. They said that, "Whilst decolonisation is a concept that can be understood in different ways, in our usage it connects contemporary racialized disadvantages with wider historical processes of colonialism. It seeks to expose and transform them through forms of collective reflection and action. So decolonizing SOAS therefore refers to thoughts and action within the university to address forms of disadvantage, associated with racism and colonialism." It also says, "A background assumption for us is that global histories of Western domination have the effect of limiting what counts as authoritative knowledge, whose knowledge is recognized, and what universities teach and how they teach it."

I was interested when I was doing my literature review that I actually came across a definition from the Open University, that was in their Open University, "Innovating Pedagogy 2019" report. And this is really very interesting. "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 worldview 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 in their own terms."

So that was the Open University's kind of definition. Kingston University, and there's a lot of discussion about whether the focus should be on decolonising the curriculum or developing an inclusive curriculum framework. And Kingston University, in developing an inclusive curriculum framework, says that, "This is about creating an accessible curriculum, enabling students to see themselves and their backgrounds reflected in the curriculum, and equipping students with the skills to positively work in a global and diverse world."

Some critics of the inclusive curriculum approach have said that it actually takes away the political context of the decolonising the curriculum movement. And one of the reasons we have the decolonising curriculum movement is to address the BAME attainment gap. Marcia's already reflected on this in relation to the University East London, we've had research on the BAME attainment gap since at least 2007.

And I think I also need to say that we need to think about whether it is an attainment gap or an awarding gap. By talking about an attainment gap, we are actually focusing on a deficit model in terms of almost putting the blame at the students. Whereas, the awarding gap is recognizing that universities have a role to play in looking at how they award to Black students. And how their curricula and other aspects of the wider university context actually is causing Black students to underachieve.

The HEFCE reported in 2017, "Tackling Inequality," talked about four explanatory factors. The curricula and learning, the relationships that the students have, which is very much about how they-- whether or not they feel they belong within a specific university environment. Again,

putting emphasis on the students, the cultural, social, and economic capital that students may bring, and psychosocial and identity factors in relation to students.

And that is where part of the problem lies, that some of the early work focused on the lack of achievement of students in terms of seeing them having a deficit, rather than focusing on universities and what universities are doing to-- and well, not doing to enable Black and Brown students to be successful.

So, in terms of decolonising the curriculum, there are many ways in which the whole notion has been understood. But much of it rests on ontology and epistemology, our worldview. Which are about how things exist in the social world and assumptions about the form and nature of that social reality. And epistemology, which is the nature of knowledge, ways of knowing and learning. And what ways of learning and knowing are actually given value.

So, when we talk about decolonising the curriculum we want to move beyond just diversification. Although diversification is important, because we need to see Black students and Black populations reflected in the curriculum. But we also want to open up conversations about race. We want to recognize the colonial epistemology, which is the way that we have come to understand and view the world is based upon colonization. And we want to develop the decolonial ontology, so decolonial ways of knowing.

Many of you are familiar, obviously, with the work of Paulo Freire, *africare* and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Many of us read it back in the '70s. And Paulo Freire talks about developing a critical pedagogy and conscientization. And this is particularly important in our current debates, that we enable students to have that critical pedagogy. And that we enable conscientization within our students, for them to question and challenge the curriculum, and to challenge what they're being taught.

And Bell Hooks, when she talks about Paulo Freire's work, she says in her book, *Teaching to Transgress*, "Education is the practice of freedom," which again, was written in 1994. "It was Freire's insistence that education could be the practice of freedom that encouraged me to create strategies for what he called conscientization in the classroom. Translating the term to critical awareness and engagement, I entered the classroom with the conviction that it was crucial for me and every other student to be an active participant, not a passive consumer.

Education as the practice of freedom was continually undermined by those professors who were actively hostile to the notion of student participation. Freire's work affirmed that education can only be liberatory if everyone claims knowledge as a field in which we all labour, so that we must value everybody's knowledge."

This was further kind of reinforced by Stuart Hall. We've already heard reference to Stuart Hall, who was a professor here at the Open University. And it is an early paper on teaching race. He talked about some of the pedagogical difficulties, and I'm going to read straight from the PowerPoint to kind of reinforce what he was saying.

He says, "First of all, there are pedagogical difficulties which are especially important, because this is an area about which people feel very strongly indeed." This is talking about race, teaching about race. "One of the strategies which some teachers adopt is to try and sidestep the explosive nature of the subject itself and walk around it, to try and catch it unaware. Except that it usually catches you unaware rather than the other way around. It is not possible to do very much with the area at a steadily high classroom temperature, but several points are important."

So, he's saying that race is explosive, and when we teach about it we have to be able to handle the nature of the discussions that are going to come out. "You have to recognize the strong emotional ideological commitments people have to positions about race. This isn't an area where people simply think they know things, but it is very strongly charged emotionally. And this fact has to be recognized and be brought out.

Whatever your commitment and feelings are about the area, and all of us have feelings about it, they have to be made clear in the way in which we handle the topic and the kinds of things we say about it. It's not a topic where an academic or intellectual neutrality is of much value. Nevertheless, I do think you have to create an atmosphere, which allows people to say unpopular things. I don't think it is at all valuable to have an atmosphere in the classroom which is so clearly unmistakably antiracist, the nature and common sense racism, which is part of the ideological air that we all breathe is not allowed to come out and express itself.

What I'm talking about here are the problems of handling the time bomb and doing so adequately so that it connects with our students' experiences. That past experience has to surface in the classroom, even if it is pretty horrendous to hear. Better to hear it than not hear it, because if you don't hear it, you don't engage with it. And this, after all, is part of the very material about which we're teaching. We are not talking here about an abstract topic, with which we are entertaining ourselves or over which we are stretching our minds. We are talking about real concrete social, political, and economic issues which touch the students' lives, which they experience.

So, we have to consider the problem of how we create an atmosphere in which those questions can be openly and honestly discussed. One in which your own position," as a teacher he's talking about, "Can emerge without people feeling overweighed by its authority.

Although, that authority is always exerted, whether you are at the front or the back of the class."

So, Stuart Hall is saying that we must talk about race, and we must find ways of talking about race when we are teaching race. And we must do that within our curriculum, or our many curriculums at the Open University.

I also just want to mention intersectionality, because in order to decolonise the curriculum, we must take an intersectional approach. Intersectionality was coined, the phrase was coined by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989. So again, what we're talking about is nothing new. The term intersectionality has been around for over 30 years.

And Kimberly says, "It's a framework for understanding the ways that the multiple aspects of our identities intersect, influence one another, and compound to create unique experiences. The concept is regularly used to describe the ways that societal privilege and oppression is complicated by the different parts of our identity that are marginalized or privileged in society." And we've heard some discussion today about White privilege. And it was quite interesting, I heard a talk by Claudia Rankine earlier this week. And she says that we shouldn't call it White privilege, we should just call it White life. Because we have the critique from White people who say that they are not privileged. Yet they occupy a privileged position in society, just by virtue of their White lives.

So, I want to now mention some of the critiques and challenges around the decolonising the curriculum. And some authors have said that our universities are too male, pale, and stale. And some of these critiques have come from those very male, pale, and stale people. But they've said that decolonising the university is highly selective, where we just cherry pick facts and targets. There is geopolitical debious, that we're not in fact engaging global south. And they say that rather than it being a call for equality, it's just a bid to insert racial and gender categorization into intellectual life, where it isn't needed.

They also say it involves getting rid of the canon and the classics. So those are some of the critiques from some of the male, pale, and stale members of the intellectual academy. But there are further critiques, which are perhaps more reflective. People say, but there aren't enough BAME academics in universities to decolonise the curriculum. The BAME academics already have huge pressures that require extra intellectual and emotional labour, which isn't recognized.

And the burden of diversifying the curriculum may in fact fall not just on BAME academics, in terms of lecturers, senior lecturers, professors, but also on BAME postgraduate and research fellows, who already have a lot of pressures on them. And that we have few academics from

the global south, and that many BAME academics at UK universities have in fact had a colonial education themselves.

And those are some of the critiques. And some of those critiques, perhaps, we do need to take on board. We do need to look at not just decolonising the curriculum but decolonising the university. Where are our BAME academics, and where is the pipeline to provide even more BAME academic?

Shirley Tate in 2019 said that, "Although many universities are now implementing equality, diversity, and inclusion strategies, but in fact, these strategies themselves, rather than addressing racism, are actually undermining those efforts." And she says that, "EDI strategies have displaced the need for anti-racist strategy in universities." So, we've got these wide EDI strategies that do not focus on anti-Blackness. That these strategies have not helped Black students who experience racism, hostility, and de-legitimization from White students and academics.

That it doesn't attend to the qualitative differences in experience faced by Black students. And that in fact, the EDI strategies have not led to the decolonisation of the curriculum. And that it hasn't enabled feelings of safety, both for Black staff and Black students, from the discrimination and the chilly climate in universities. The EDI strategies can lead to pressure to be silent about racism, and a return to focusing on the culture of the racialized other as the problem, rather than the institutional culture based on white supremacy within universities.

And that EDI strategies have also enabled the emergence of the get out clause of unconscious bias, which refuses to acknowledge the existence of institutional racism. So those are some of the challenges which I feel we must rise to in terms of our EDI strategy.

So, decolonising the curriculum has become a buzz word, and there's a long list of universities that are actually saying they're decolonising the curriculum, and decolonising the university. The Closing the Gap report states that there are many things that we need to do in terms of closing the gap. We need to provide strong leadership in universities. We need to have conversations about race and changing the culture. And we need to develop racially diverse and inclusive environments. And we need to make sure that we are collecting evidence and analysing the data, they called it the attainment gap, but I think we should now call it the awarding gap. And we need to have some kind of understanding about what works and what doesn't work.

So, as I said, there are a whole range of universities now involved in work around decolonising the curriculum. And some of them-- and they are all doing this in different ways. Some are student led, some universities it's just a statement that they are going to decolonise

the curriculum. Other universities are actually doing it in a forensic and deep way. And I think that list is growing all the time.

Here at the Open University, I've been working with Darren Gray, who has developed the Inclusive Curriculum Tool. And the Inclusive Curriculum Tool is based upon three principles. That all students can access the curriculum. So, it means checking all the content that is used, including language, that we are avoiding colonial language, and providing a glossary of new and complex terms.

That all students see themselves reflected in the curriculum. That's in terms of content and including case studies and drawing from sources that reflect a wide range of diversity. That students are allowed to use their diverse experiences and backgrounds to contribute to the learning and assessment activities. And that students are equipped to participate in a global and diverse world.

So, we must ensure that students are exposed to a range of culturally challenging views, opinions, and contexts. And ensuring that there are structured opportunities for an understanding of and respect for diversity, and the contribution that diversity makes within an international context. So that is Inclusive Curriculum Tool that has been developed here at the Open University, and which we are using in many ways.

I've been looking at some of the modules in health and social care. I know it's been used in FASS it's been used in law. So, it is something that we are rolling out and looking at how we can use it to actually look at decolonising the curriculum.

I think I should also say here that we have an inclusive curriculum working group under the APP, to make sure that we actually have the structure, infrastructure to be able to develop this, develop the work. And we also have a decolonising the curriculum working group, that myself, and Parvati are chairing. Again, to make sure that at a university wide level we can develop the work around decolonising the curriculum.

Now I think when we look at the decolonising process that we have to do this work reflectively and sensitively. And Harshad Keval at Canterbury University Kent in his paper of 2019 said that, "We have to consider certain pitfalls, and some dos and don'ts in terms of the decolonising process." He says, "Don't use the term diversity, inclusivity, and attainment instead of talking about structural racism, neo-colonial narratives, and institutionally embedded bias. Do ask what power structures am I involved in, more often than not, roped into, where decolonising is actively ignored? What can I help to dismantle? By not talking about racism, who is left out, and what becomes normalized?"

He says, "Don't say, it's really not my area, I don't know anything about this. Do ask, what have I assumed about what it is worth knowing? Don't ask, can't a person of colour or specific gender do it, I haven't got time. Do say, I will go and do some reading and thinking. Can I talk with you and colleagues more about this? Don't ask the question, but I haven't colonized anything, why do I need to do this? Do ask, when

I look around me, where do networks of power coalesce, and what role does colour, race, language, gender, disability, etc cetera play in this? Don't ask, if decolonising involves bringing all these other ideas and writers, what about the classics? Do ask, what do I understand to be a classic or canon, and why?"

And then finally, "Don't make the statement, there are bigger problems in the university system to deal with. Do think about what conditions have brought about my framing of these problems as separate? In what ways does this connect to the other problems within the institution?" So, this isn't something that is an add on, it's something that is integral, the whole way in which the university operates.

So just to come to some conclusion, some of the principles about decolonising the curriculum is that it's not just about adding a few BAME faces or case studies. We must take a social justice framework. We must develop a critical pedagogy and a global perspective. We must also develop an intersectional lens.

So when we look at different analytical categories in relation to ethnicity, race, gender, age, social class, disability, sexuality, we have to think who's included in this category. What role does the inequality play, and where are the similarities? We need in our modules and our courses to discuss oppression and how it operates in British society.

Quite often, in our modules at the Open University, and I think other universities, we reflect, inequalities in our teaching as if they are given. And we don't discuss how the oppression has occurred, and how it operates. We need to enable conversations about race and racism.

So we also need to recognize that decolonising the curriculum cannot happen outside of decolonising the university. We have to look at the whole university structure. We have to look at whether or not we have any Black and Brown people within the university, where those people are located within the university structure. How many Black professors do we have? Do we have any Black professors?

As Marcia said, we now have 28 Black women professors in the UK. And some universities don't have any Black women professors. It's not just about adding a few global south authors

to our reading lists, and our reading lists which are male dominated reading lists teach lessons about who is an intellectual authority.

Now some of the authors whose work I referred to during my presentation, these people are not new. These people have been around for 30 or 40 years, they're established authors, they're established intellectuals. And sometimes we don't cite Black people, we don't cite people from the global south. And we must make sure that in our teaching that we are not only including Black and minority ethnic people and people from the global south, but that in our research, and in our publications, we are citing Black people. We are citing people from global south. We are recognizing that those intellectual traditions exist.

And it's not about abolishing the canon. We must interrogate its assumptions and broaden our intellectual vision to include a wide range of perspectives. Black and Brown students need to see themselves reflected in the curriculum, and as legitimate

creators of knowledge. Across the world, across the globe, we have legitimate creators of knowledge. And we must reflect this within our curriculum.

Within the curriculum, we need to interrogate the fundamental role of slavery and colonization in all of our curricula. When we talk about decolonising the curriculum, we're not just talking about social sciences and humanities, but we must also talk about science, technology, engineering, and maths, so it's across the curriculum. It must be across our nursing curriculum; it must be across our medical curriculum. Because a lot of that knowledge has been based on the scholarship of white males, and not on global scholars.

And just to end, decolonising the curriculum isn't just the role of BAME academics. We all need to work together on this. So, it's something that we should all be doing together.

There is now a huge literature when people say, well, what's the literature? There is a huge literature on decolonising curriculum and decolonising the university. And following George Floyd many places have actually produced reading lists. So, I think that there is a lot that we can all do to decolonise the curriculum.

And I will finish there. I think I'm about nine minutes early. So, I think that leaves time for discussion.

OK, thank you.