Designing and delivering teaching to facilitate a decolonising of the classroom
Reflections from a Black Bahamian male

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I am a Bahamian PhD candidate and Teaching Fellow at the University of Leeds. My research uses an intersectionality approach to explore gender and health in small island states. My teaching broadly covers politics, international health, and qualitative research methods. I have taught a range of modules in the School of Politics and International Studies and the Nuffield Centre for International Health and Development in the School of Medicine.

Abstract

Global conversations about racial inequities have grown significantly, including in the United Kingdom. These conversations include critical discourse about the impact of colonialism and its legacy that manifests in physical, socio-cultural, and political structures and our higher education institutions. Many of these structures are still apparent in formerly colonised countries such as The Bahamas, which gained independence from England in 1973. This made teaching a module which aims to unravel the making of our current global systems particularly relevant and of critical importance.

This article reflects on the experience of teaching an undergraduate module in Politics and International Studies about the impact of colonialism and its legacy from a Black Bahamian male perspective. It highlights how reflection as praxis, choice examples and studies, and feedback can be used in the delivery and design of teaching to facilitate a decolonising of the classroom. As higher education institutions consider ways to decolonise, teachers must be deliberate in the tools and techniques used to enact necessary change.

Keywords: Decolonisation, Intersectionality, Positionality, Black Lives Matter, Reflections

Introduction

Global conversations about racial inequities have grown significantly with the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement, including in the United Kingdom. These conversations include discourse about the impact of colonialism and its legacy that manifests in physical, socio-cultural, and political structures in our society and academic institutions. This made teaching an undergraduate module which aims to unravel the making of our current global systems particularly relevant and of critical importance.

Movements to highlight the legacy of colonialism in Higher Education (HE) institutions, and academia more broadly, have happened before. Decades ago, indigenous people in post-colonial countries called for practices in HE that centred knowledge, histories, and perspectives of indigenous people (Battiste *et al.*, 2002). In 2015, student protests in South Africa at the University of Cape Town called for removing a statue of Cecil Rhodes (Gopal, 2021). Rhodes represents "a symbol of genocide, enslavement, conquest, colonisation, apartheid, material dispossession and author of inequalities" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018:222). The movement in South Africa led to other protests at HE institutions worldwide, including in England (Gopal, 2021). The heightened interest in racial inequities and the role colonialism plays in those inequities, therefore, build on these historical calls to critically examine academic institutions and our classrooms.

This article reflects on the experience of teaching the impact of colonialism and its legacy in a British classroom from my Black Bahamian male perspective. It highlights the challenges and opportunities of designing and delivering teaching on this topic and outlines how to facilitate decolonising the classroom using different tools and techniques.

Positionality, intersectionality and teaching practice

As a Politics and International Studies teacher, I lectured, tutored, and led weekly seminars in an undergraduate module on the making of our global systems. While my lectures were online, tutoring, and weekly seminars were face-to-face and in person.

As I taught how the British Empire systematically advanced its political and economic power through imperialism, my positionality as a Black Bahamian male and my work in intersectionality came to the fore. Intersectionality sees individuals as occupying multiple overlapping social categories which interact and render unique systems of privilege and marginalisation at the intersection of these overlaps. Therefore, I am aware of how my Black Bahamian male self is in simultaneous positions of power and marginalisation, particularly as I navigate primarily white male spaces (HESA, 2022). The coinage of the term 'intersectionality' is credited to Kimberlé Crenshaw in her work in the early 1990s about physical and structural violence against Black Women in the United States (Crenshaw, 1991). However, the thinking around intersectionality has been around long before (Mohammed, 2003). For example, Caribbean feminist scholars in the 1970s and 1980s examined how womanhood was differentiated by race and class in the structural marginalisation Black Women faced by the colonial state (Mohammed, 2003). As a postgraduate researcher, I use an intersectionality approach to examine the intersections of health, policy, and politics in The Bahamas – a country in the Caribbean which gained independence from Britain in 1973. My

scholarship underscores the importance of systems and histories, including colonialism, in the current manifestation of health inequities in the country (Poitier *et al.*, 2022).

I was deliberate in reflecting on my positionality and scholarship in the design and teaching of this module and ensured that there was space for my students to do so as well. In unravelling the current global systems, it was important to reflect on how those systems intersected with our identities and education. This brought a real-life application to teaching that decentred Eurocentric masculine norms (Ortiz *et al.*, 2018). In practice, this often meant moments of silent study for students before moving into pairs or smaller groups for discussions and conceptual framing. The challenge of empowering students to unravel the power asymmetries at the global level and how that impacts everyday life at the micro level became an incredible opportunity to showcase vulnerability, trust, and honesty in the classroom.

Deliberate decentring: using teaching tools and techniques to advance critical thought

The classroom became a safe space for the deliberate use of teaching tools and techniques to advance a critique of the subject matter and the production of knowledge itself. This was done in three main ways.

First, as mentioned previously, using reflection as a praxis provided the space to think about individual positionality. It was important for the students and me to reflect on and understand how many assumptions of how our global systems operate were built on the advancement of Eurocentric white male power. It required an honest assessment to dissect how we all use power and privilege to navigate and upkeep modern systems which enhance social inequities at intersections of race, gender, sexuality, ability and more. The invitation to self-reflection, though not always in written form, advanced multiple pathways for learning that did not rely on me, as a teacher, being the ultimate holder of truth and knowledge in the classroom's safe space. Reflection has long been seen as an important component in knowledge production, including in research (Shenton, 2004).

Second, I deliberately choose examples and case studies depicting knowledge from marginalised voices to enhance critical thought. To do this, I systematically used images, stories, videos, and literature from various actors from different backgrounds and intersections, including gender, race, ability and nationality. I did this to expose students to theories and insights by scholars from nonhegemonic contexts and to empower students who had marginalised experiences to find reassurance in the classroom (Ortiz *et al.*, 2018). These examples did not always share the same perspective, which challenged notions of a homogenous minority voice and added great points for students' critical discussions.

Lastly, feedback was used to advance emerging critical thought. Students were provided verbal and written feedback on their verbal contributions to class, formative written pieces and final assessments to support their thoughts and ideas. Feedback contained areas and examples of how to improve, signposts to further resources, links to how different sections may be explored further for the summative assessment and invitations to discuss if needed (Lilly *et al.*, 2010). I also sought feedback on my approach to ensure my teaching met student needs, and ways of learning, at critical junctures throughout the semester. For example, student feedback highlighted the value of using technology in the classroom for

anonymous contributions. I used Mentimeter for real-time student polls and question-and-answer opportunities. I was initially uneasy about allowing anonymous contributions while in class because I feared it would be abused and reduce student accountability (Stanley, 2021). Feedback from students, however, highlighted that it gave additional opportunities to participate, make mistakes and see how common thoughts were among peers. I, therefore, adjusted lesson plans to allow for more anonymous contributions, guided by student comments about its value.

Conclusion

As global conversations about racial inequities and the impact of colonialism continue, including in our HE systems, it is essential that teaching is designed and delivered to facilitate decolonising our classrooms. There are opportunities to use tools and techniques to advance these conversations and processes. These include using reflection as praxis, choosing examples and studies which highlight marginalised voices, and using feedback as a tool to promote further critical thought. As HE institutions continue to wrestle with a new wave of calls to decolonise, and many institutions have heeded this call, everyday teaching practice must be deliberate in the tools and techniques used to quickly and thoughtfully enact necessary change.

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