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## Decolonizing the Academy

Who's afraid of the call to decolonize higher education?

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Perhaps you've seen the T-shirt that says "Decolonize Everything."

The word "decolonize" has become inescapable. There are calls to decolonize the museum and the art worlds, fashion, diet, publishing, the internet, and the media.

But it's within education that calls for decolonization have echoed loudest. The phrases proliferate: decolonize the academy, the canon, the classroom, the syllabus and our pedagogy.

The ever-expanding use of the decolonizing concept has provoked pushback, with two influential scholars, Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, arguing that we should not treat decolonization as a metaphor (<https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/des/article/view/18630>) for various ways to improve education, or for example, advancing social justice, adopting critical methodologies or implementing more student-centered pedagogies.

Nevertheless, given the prevalence of the term, we should ask: What do the calls to decolonize the academy actually mean?

It's fairly obvious what it means to decolonize a museum. It's a matter of making a museum more inclusive: expanding or dismantling the artistic canon, shedding or challenging Eurocentric aesthetic standards, and sharing authority for collecting and interpreting artworks with those whose voices and perspectives were previously marginalized.

It's also pretty obvious how one might decolonize a scholarly journal like the *American Historical Review* (<https://academic.oup.com/ahr/article/123/1/xiv/4825089>). This requires the journal to correct the exclusionary practices that effectively silenced the voices of scholars of color and Indigenous and women scholars, slighted the historical experiences of nonelites, and snubbed facets of life that lay outside the privileged domains of politics, diplomacy and military and economic affairs.

Decolonizing the *AHR* also means opening its pages more broadly, soliciting contributions aggressively from those whose work was previously ignored, evaluating submissions from a wider range of perspectives, reviewing more varied books, working more closely with authors asked to revise and resubmit, and making the journal more responsive to alternate points of view.

But what it means to decolonize the academy is less obvious.

- Is this simply an additive process that involves expanding topical coverage and incorporating previously marginalized voices and perspectives? Or does it require something more radical: Questioning or critiquing concepts, structures of knowledge and standards that arose during the age of European expansion?
- Is this merely a matter of applying critical thinking skills to previously taken-for-granted topics and assumptions? Or does this involve rethinking how evidence is assessed, how texts are read and how knowledge is produced, validated and disseminated?
- Decolonization certainly demands that we respect the histories, lived experiences, voices, cultures and perspectives of all our students. But does it also require us to engage with issues of power, including the ways that hierarchical assumptions and inequalities rooted in gender, class, race, ethnicity and other variables influence classroom dynamics?

It is easy to dismiss calls to decolonize the academy as simply the latest in a long series of passing educational fads. But I think we should take the demand seriously. After all, historically, formal education played a pivotal role in the colonial enterprise. Boarding schools for Indigenous children have a sordid history of ethnocide: of barring the use of Native languages or the practice of Indigenous religions in a bid to “Kill the Indian to save the man.”

Alongside all the talk about education as a gateway to opportunity and advancement, schools, in the past, quite consciously pursued a variety of noneducational goals. These included implanting a particular version of history and sense of patriotism, glorifying Western cultural achievements, and inculcating civic and cultural values that were often at odds with students’ familial values.

Less openly, but no less importantly, schools also helped legitimate socioeconomic divides, “naturalize” gender and class differences, define intelligence in narrowly academic terms, and reinforce a sense that achievement was mainly the result of merit and that failure to succeed was primarily a product of personal defects, deficits and deficiencies.

**At its most radical** (<https://www.luc.edu/fcjp/anti-racistcoursedesign/decolonizingyoursyllabus/>), decolonization means “resisting and actively unlearning the dangerous and harmful legacy of colonization, particularly the racist ideas that Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) people are inferior to White Europeans.” **It entails** (<https://college.up.edu/gwsm/decolonize-your-syllabus.html>) **interrogating and dismantling** “power structures that carry

legacies of racism, imperialism, and colonialism.” But more commonly, it calls on faculty to address a series of curricular, pedagogical and evaluative challenges.

### Professors have a responsibility

(<https://www.keele.ac.uk/equalitydiversity/equalityframeworksandactivities/equalityawardsandreports/equalityawards/raceequalitycharter/keeledecolonisingthecurriculummanifesto-for-decolonising-the-curriculum>) as intellectuals to question established paradigms and hierarchies; combat the erasure (or mere ignorance) of knowledge produced by those outside established institutions; highlight the contributions, ideas and experiences of all people; and recognize the ways that power relations shape the production, dissemination and application of knowledge.

Let’s look at five areas where calls for transformation have been loudest.

## 1. Revamping the Curriculum

A 2019 Open University report ([https://ou-iet.cdn.prismic.io/ou-iet/b0f6e67d-3cb3-45d6-946c-4b34330fb9f9\\_innovating-pedagogy-2019.pdf](https://ou-iet.cdn.prismic.io/ou-iet/b0f6e67d-3cb3-45d6-946c-4b34330fb9f9_innovating-pedagogy-2019.pdf)) provides the best succinct statement of the value of decolonizing the curriculum that I have read:

“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 ... Decolonizing learning prompts us to consider everything we study from new perspectives ... 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.”

A decolonized curriculum is not only more inclusive, it also problematizes established paradigms; engages with issues of power, hierarchy and equity; traces ideas’ origins; and shows how key concepts have been used for good and ill.

## 2. Reimagining Our Syllabi

A syllabus is many things at once: a class précis, a course calendar, a list of a class’s requirements and readings, and, legally, a binding (and bloated) contract between students and professors. At its best, a syllabus offers something more: insights into a course’s architecture – its learning objectives, expectations, pedagogy, sequence of activities and modes of assessment.

As William Germano and Kit Nicholls ([https://www.amazon.com/dp/B08CBP5DGV/ref=dp-kindle-redirect?\\_encoding=UTF8&btcr=1](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B08CBP5DGV/ref=dp-kindle-redirect?_encoding=UTF8&btcr=1)) make clear in their recent book on that humble, unremarkable document, preparing a syllabus provides an unmatched opportunity to engage in an intentional design process. Instructors should ask themselves:

- How do I transform my class into a community of inquiry?
- How should I structure, sequence and pace readings and assignments?

- What is the readings' purpose -- to provide essential background and reference information, supplements to lectures, models to emulate, or texts to explicate?
- What kinds of activities and assignments are most likely to help students attain the skills and knowledge that I want them to master and how can I best assess whether they have met the course's objectives?

Decolonizing the syllabus requires something more than the token inclusion of a number of non-Western or nonwhite authors. It's about how to engage and motivate students and encourage them to participate actively in their own learning. Equally important, it's about how to expose them to a wide variety of voices, perspectives and analytical frameworks; foster debate and discussion; and construct their own understanding of the subject matter.

### 3. Reimagining Classroom Dynamics

Decolonizing the classroom is not simply about content. It's also about classroom dynamics.

A decolonization approach begins with a recognition that classrooms are sites of power, privilege, hierarchy, inclusion, exclusion and implicit norms about appropriate forms of argumentation and behavior that themselves reflect certain cultural presumptions about gender, race and other variables.

Among the challenges an instructor faces are how to maximize student participation, how to make every student feel a sense of belonging and how to orchestrate lively, dynamic discussions that are open and civil, where students feel able to express diverse (but grounded) opinions without fear of embarrassment or ridicule.

### 4. Rethinking Our Pedagogies

In *Pedagogies of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire's landmark 1970 call for a critical pedagogy, the author contrasts two opposing forms of teaching (<https://www.luc.edu/fcip/anti-racistcoursedesign/decolonizingyoursyllabus/preparingtodecolonizemysyllabus/>): "banking" content "into" students versus creating a learning environment where students and their instructor can learn from one another, drawing on their lived experience and cultural background.

In Freire's view, the classroom should provide a space where the many students who have felt (and been) marginalized can feel empowered and view themselves as owners of knowledge who are free to question what is taught, rather than as recipients and regurgitators of whatever "official knowledge" is presented to them.

Pedagogy, from this perspective, should challenge the idea that the instructor is the sole holder of knowledge. The learning process, in turn, should involve investigation, dialogue and critical reflection, and the content and activities should emphasize relevance and applicability, with an ultimate goal of liberating students to think of themselves as independent and critical thinkers.

## 5. Bringing All Students to Mastery

Equal educational access is not enough. Our goal should be to give every student an equal opportunity to participate and to help all students achieve a viable level of mastery.

This requires an instructor to recognize and reject practices and norms that lead students to disengage and acknowledge that many traditional forms of assessment are biased and fail to accurately measure students' command of the course material.

More than that, instructors must assume far greater responsibility for bringing students to success. Their primary role is not to purvey information, but to mentor, advise, tutor, coach and reach out proactively – to truly be students' partners in their learning journey.

Calls to decolonize the classroom make many instructors feel uncomfortable, fearing that this will contribute to a more toxic campus culture and divert attention from essential content and skills and result, instead, in an undue emphasis on systemic racism, white privilege, intersectionality, implicit bias, microaggressions and language policing, turning the classroom into a T-group.

Some critics go so far as to equate decolonization with the “struggle sessions” ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Struggle\\_session](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Struggle_session)),” deployed in China during the Mao era and as a thinly veiled attacks on rigor and professorial autonomy.

But the problems that decolonization identifies involving bias and racial and gender equity in the classroom are real and should be openly acknowledged and addressed.

In its essence, the demand that we decolonize our curriculum, syllabi, classroom cultures, pedagogy and assessments reflects values that almost all of us favor.

- That we should subject our courses, assignments, teaching methods and assessment techniques to close, critical scrutiny to ensure that they aren't biased or exclusionary.
- That we should purposefully integrate alternative voices, opinions and perspectives into our classes.
- That advancing equity and inclusion requires instructors to be empathetic and culturally and emotional literate and responsive, and that their courses should give students flexible ways to demonstrate mastery of class material and that their grading policies should offer students opportunities to grow.
- That instructors need to cultivate class cultures where all students feel accepted, respected, engaged, empowered, validated and well supported.

For all of us who believe that a liberal education is supposed to be liberatory, freeing its recipients from superstition and outmoded traditions, aren't those commitments simply common sense?

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