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Review of Decolonizing University Teaching and Learning: An Entry Model for Grappling with Complexities



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Decolonizing University Teaching and Learning: An Entry Model for Grappling with Complexities
by Danielle Tran, Bloomsbury, 2021, 169pp., £90 (Hardback) £81 (Ebook-pdf), £81(Ebook – Epub & Mobi). ISBN 9781350160019

Tran's new book offers an eminently useful and approachable discussion around student and staff engagement with decolonization in the context of the higher education (HE) sector. In this book, Tran argues that decolonization is not just a historical or theoretical construct but a practical approach that aims to systematically efface the colonial epistemology, and to rethink, reframe, and reconstruct the way people see the world. Students and staff have been leading the call for decolonization of universities and public life. For example, movements like The Rhodes Must Fall at the University of Cape Town in South Africa that aim to challenge the dominating colonial legacies (Bhambra et al., 2018) have brought prominence to the issue of decolonizing universities. This campaign inspired the emergence of allied activities in other parts of the world, for instance, attempts by Harvard Law School's Royall Must Fall movement to reckon with its past ties to slavery (Beeman, 2019). In the UK, the National Union of Students leads the influential campaign, "Why is My Curriculum White?" (Williams & Benjamin, 2022) to question the tendency to favor Eurocentric perspectives and the general lack of diversity in curricula across UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Many universities have started running their own campaigns to engage in the ongoing process of decolonizing, particularly by addressing students' dissatisfaction with the university curriculum, teaching, and learning environments, such as the Decolonizing School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) Learning and Teaching Toolkit (2018).

The author of the reviewed book, Dr Danielle Tran, who has worked at various UK HEIs in learning and teaching roles, situates the decolonizing process as an extension of inclusivity work and calls for it to be addressed as a prioritized agenda. In this book, she highlights the benefits of decolonizing

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teaching and learning for all HE students and staff in the UK context. The book provides the Teaching, Relationship, Activity and Assessment, and Content (TRAAC) model as an entry point to engage in decolonizing discourses in HE and its application in the contributors' critical reflections throughout the book. The model does not homogenize individual experiences into the same pattern but draws attention to HE practitioners' shared experiences and concerns about the highly pertinent and unresolved question of how to decolonize teaching and learning in the modern world. This book is a good reference for HE staff and students who are interested in decolonizing teaching and learning and those who are unsure about what it involves and what its impact could be.

The book is divided into eight chapters and a conclusion. At the end of four chapters, the author includes 12 contributors' critical reflections on various issues relating to decolonization such as staff-student relationships, curriculum design, subject-specific challenges, and wider issues within the higher education. They are HE students, lecturers, (former) university officers, and a library staff member, spread across different institutions and departments. By making visible the perspectives of such diverse contributors, the book aims to show that decolonizing HE teaching and learning is not limited to one area of work but is a process that requires attention and commitment across a university to make meaningful change.

Chapter 1, *What Does It Mean to Decolonize Teaching and Learning?*, outlines the recent movements and arguments that call for the decolonization of teaching and learning within HE globally and particularly within the United Kingdom. By introducing several decolonizing university campaigns, the author refers to different scholars' positions (e.g., Fomunyam, 2017) on decolonization in general and decolonizing teaching and learning in particular. Although the author presents multiple understandings of decolonization, she argues that decolonizing is an evolving process that cannot be reduced to a singular mode of understanding. In order to illuminate the notion of decolonization, the author positions it as an extension of the concept of inclusivity, as both "aim for all students to experience positive well-being and belonging at university" (p.14). To achieve the goal, the author suggests that the best way to respond to calls for decolonizing teaching and learning is to listen, reflect, explore, and review. Under the broad definition of decolonizing, the contributors in this book have the biggest flexibility to discuss their understandings of decolonization whilst focusing on shared themes and issues raised. In the last section of this chapter, the author unpacks critical race theory as a theoretical framework for decolonizing teaching and learning in HE. This theory is based on the premise that race is a constructed and historically contextualized category that is used to oppress and exploit people of color (Han & Price, 2015). Drawing on this theory, Tran argues that endeavoring to decolonize teaching and learning in HE should benefit all students and staff within the institution.

Chapter 2, *What Is Good Development?: With Contributions from Nelly Kibirige and Bernadine Idowu-Onibokun*, and Chapter 3, *The TRAAC Model*, explains the importance of considering decolonization as a factor of what constitutes "good development" and how the TRAAC model can contribute to this. Pinning down discussions surrounding the processes of decolonizing teaching and learning, Chapter 2 discusses the connection between engagement with decolonizing work and the continuing professional development and its focus on good practice. This is because both are rooted in the desire to positively impact the development of all staff and to enhance the experience of students. The two contributors, Nelly Kibirige and Bernadine Idowu-Onibokun, share their experience of how teachers work with students to form a developmental dialogue, for instance by adopting a nonjudgmental attitude towards students' ideas. The author finally suggests using the TRAAC model as a guideline for approaching the designing or delivering of decolonizing practices in HE.

Chapter 3 summarizes the aim of the TRAAC model with the intent of providing a reflective and reflexive entry point to help encourage challenging conversations around decolonizing teaching and

learning. The TRAAC model consists of four themed segments, each of which poses three questions to provide an entry point relating to Teaching, Relationship, Activity and Assessment, and Content regarding decolonizing teaching and learning, which can be summarised as follows based on Tran's illustration (pp. 51–60):

“T” for “Teaching Approach,” which includes the three questions below:

- What power dynamics are generated from your approach?
- How is the learning environment participatory?
- What variety do you have in your teaching approaches?

“R” for “Relationship,” which includes the three questions below:

- What shared connections do you have with your students?
- Have you reflected on unconscious bias toward your student groups?
- How may the way students perceive you affect the learning environment?

“AA” for “Activity and Assessment,” which includes the three questions below:

- How do you show respect to all voices?
- How have you considered your student groups in your assessment strategy?
- How inclusive are your learning activities?

“C” for “Content,” which includes the three questions below:

- What will the benefits be for a multicultural society?
- What perspectives/contexts have been considered?
- How have you considered your student groups in content selection?

Chapter 4, *Bringing Together Materials for a Decolonized Curriculum: With Contributions from Jason Arday and Joanne Dunham*, and Chapter 5, *Moving Away from Passive Inclusivity*, both focus on the “Contents” and “Activities and Assessment” segments of the TRAAC model. Chapter 4 first outlines the different ways in which curriculum can be understood and how this affects teaching approaches and students’ learning experience; it then highlights the importance of including student voices when developing a decolonized curriculum, which means student needs, contexts, and lived experiences are acknowledged in the process. In the end, the two contributors Jason Arday and Joanne Dunham problematize the lack of diversity of knowledge being produced and communicated through university curricula due to the maintenance and ongoing privileging of Eurocentric canons, and call for collaborations within and across different areas of HEIs such as senior leaders and library staff on the decolonizing agenda.

Chapter 5 discusses how the decolonizing agenda aims to move away from passive inclusivity and surface-level changes when reviewing curriculum design and delivery. It then explores the extent to which the relationship between researcher, participants, and methodology can form a decolonized space in which research can be carried out. The chapter then examines teaching practices that can affect levels of student belonging and strategies that can be employed to enhance levels of belonging. For example, teachers are encouraged to make learning materials more relevant to the student experience through which they can create spaces and opportunities for critical discussion, spaces that value and are open to all voices. The chapter also considers the roles which English as the primary language of instruction in the majority of UK higher education can play in the process of decolonizing. By pointing out the

challenges caused by the low English proficiency of international students such as limited classroom engagement and peer dialogue, the author argues that English as the instruction language can be a barrier for them. To mitigate it, she encourages teachers to be more mindful about the choice of language in the multicultural classroom and to treat students' prior cultural and rhetorical knowledge as an asset.

Chapter 6, *Staff and Student Perceptions: With Contributions from Ryan Carty, Rahma Elmahdi, and Emilie Fairnington*, looks at the “Relationship” segment of the TRAAC model to consider unconscious bias and its potential influence on teaching and learning. It starts with stressing the importance of reflecting on teachers’ biases, how these have arisen, and how they can be tackled so that they do not negatively impact the student learning experience. It then moves on to the importance of students’ engaging with unconscious bias training and reflexive activities. The author argues those unconscious biases are associated with both internal factors such as individual motivations, belief systems, and experiences that can influence an individual’s teaching style, approach, and decisions in relation to curriculum design, as well as external reasons, especially the power of seeing diversity within classrooms and universities generally, and how a lack of visible role models for BAME (Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic) students can affect levels of belonging and aspiration. The three contributors, Ryan Carty, Emilie Fairnington, and Rahma Elmahdi, who are two university (former) officers and one junior researcher look back on how these internal and external factors function in their past and present experience and share their mindfulness about how they are perceived by their students and colleagues.

Chapter 7, *Delivery and Power Dynamics*, focuses on the “Teaching Approach” and “Relationships” segments of the TRAAC model. It begins by reviewing how power dynamics between students and staff can affect levels of engagement, hierarchy, and belonging. The chapter then explores the issue of trust in the classroom, and how it can be given, received, shared, and fluctuated. Finally, it looks at how language can be divisive and inclusive, and how narratives by one group about another can lead to perpetuating stereotypes and inequalities. Central to the power dynamics in the classroom, Tran addresses “how” something is taught and talked about plays a vital role in teaching and learning.

Chapter 8, *Implementing the TRAAC Model across Disciplines: With Contributions from Paul Breen, Anthony Cullen, Rahma Elmahdi, Peter Jones, Savvas Michael, and Dawn Reilly*, consists of six case studies from six scholars reflecting on experiences that are based across several institutions and departments. The six contributors examine how decolonizing teaching and learning has affected their work within their disciplines. Three contributors, Anthony Cullen, Dawn Reilly, and Savvas Michael, use the TRAAC model as a whole, examining every segment and interlinking with each other in their subject areas, while the other three contributors, Paul Breen, Peter Jones, and Rahma Elmahdi, extend the use of the TRAAC model to wider discussions on decolonizing such as language and social structures. One case study particularly interests me – Paul Breen’s highlight on international students’ own culture in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) contexts. He shares his understanding of Chinese students and their cultures—“these students come to the UK from a culture shaped by Confucianism which downplays the importance of forming individual opinions. [...] It is more about acquiring wisdom than questioning that knowledge” (p. 137). Paul’s awareness and effort to understand students’ different cultural backgrounds are crucial. However, from an intercultural perspective, this may lead to cultural essentialism, meaning that culture is regarded as given (rather than constructed), framed in terms of differences between nations and potentially offering a causal explanation for individual behavior (Handford *et al.*, 2019). In my view of point, to avoid this issue, teachers in multicultural classrooms need to embrace complexity over reductionism. It means teachers cannot presume students from the same social categories such as nationality share discrete, fixed, natural, uniform, and defining characteristics but instead, treat them as a social group with cohesive behavior without prescribing ethnic, national, and international entities (Holliday, 2019).

As a whole, Tran's TRAAC model is one of the attempts of universities to examine both their epistemic content and epistemic practices of decolonizing teaching and learning. Including the principles of the TRAAC model into the "good development" process will provide a space for decolonization in HE and make it more accessible for teachers in their practice. With this model, teachers can be more comfortable and guided with conversations about (de)colonization. However, the book leaves several questions about this model unanswered, including where it is from, how it was shaped, and how contributors were informed about this model. This lack of background information leads to a lack of transparency, reliability, and robustness of the proposed model. Zooming in on the specific segments of the TRAAC model, in the "Teaching approach" and "Relationship" sectors, the examples of reducing power imbalance and building teacher-student connections that the author draws on are mostly from elementary education rather than HE (see p. 127), which may not accurately represent the student-teacher relationship in the HE classroom, especially given the age difference between students in elementary and higher education. Therefore, more updated studies in the HE context could be helpful to understand staff-student relationships. In the "Content" sector, I agree with the author that students' engagement in curriculum design and enhancement is crucial to ensure students' diverse voices are represented. However, given the complexity of curriculum design and development, the practical challenge of how students can be confident about and comfortable with expressing their opinions when facing academics and professional staff who by definition have more experience, subject knowledge and authority remain. There is a need to investigate the feasibility of student participation in curriculum design in different contexts and to examine the factors that influence the nature of student participation in curriculum design within these contexts.

Although some HEIs in the UK have adopted decolonizing strategies, in practice, those involved in decolonizing work can confront backlash and resistance from both individuals and institutions. Not everyone wants to engage in the decolonizing process as it can be dislocating. Tran's book encourages people to embrace this discomfort and treat it as a learning opportunity through which staff will critically reflect on teaching and bring positive changes to students' learning. Instead of framing any other group as "the other" and the perpetrator, this book uses the TRAAC model to inspire decolonizing conversations between different groups.

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