

An in-depth and fascinating insight to decolonising the HE curriculum

Book review: Tran, D. (2021) *Decolonizing university teaching and learning: an entry model for grappling with complexities* (London: Bloomsbury Academic).

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Overview

This highly fascinating read looks at the relationship between curriculum, pedagogy, staff, and students under the lens of decolonisation. It demonstrates at every turn how to facilitate learning using wide-reaching concepts that support those in education, pulling together research and information on this topic to support those working, studying, developing, and researching within higher education. This text examines academic practices including lectures and their content, going beyond looking at reading lists and assessment criteria, by drawing on the experiences and impact of the Covid-19 lockdown.

It really feels like this text has delved deep into the make-up and design of higher education to review its relationship with equality and assess how the institution can be decolonised. It focuses on all aspects of how equality, or the lack of it, impacts on learners' development in higher education, by drawing on students' experiences to provide greater knowledge and understanding. Its aim is to create an equal culture and environment for individuals to thrive and develop. This text provides a sense of pulling this topic together in a coherent and timely manner and uses this to demonstrate how students can learn most effectively within the sector. This book is very much a critical developmental dialogue, with conversations and discussions still taking place. Yet it could also act as an agent for change, addressing an issue that the book demonstrates exists within every aspect of higher education. A key objective of the text is to highlight the benefits of decolonisation

within teaching and learning, for both staff and students, rather than offering a resolution or answer to the issue. This book is not afraid to make strong suggestions on how higher education needs to move forward, with the suggestion at one point being its complete dismantling and rebuilding to be more inclusive. Reading the voices of students within the text brings a sense of realism to the book – this is not just theory – creating an approachable and personal read, one which is more relatable to those working within the learning context of higher education. Organisations and individuals that seek to create a change in culture in terms of decolonisation will find this a highly relevant read.

Structure and content

One of the strengths of the text is how it varies between discussing decolonisation as a topic, subject, movement, process, or an agenda: at times the chapter authors combine multiple facets to define and support decolonisation. The text acknowledges that it is not a reference guide to all resources on the topic, but it does reflect an extensive body of work. Though this is a relatively recent topic of discussion, there is an extensive breadth of work included within the text which provides a full and broad critical dialogue regarding the topic of decolonisation within education. A rich variety of content adds to the narrative and the text takes a global approach to the situation. The book references the Covid-19 lockdowns and how academic institutions needed to quickly adapt delivery to online teaching; however, as it points out, the move to online teaching needed to be considerate of the students as individuals, ensuring needs were met within a digital environment.

The book employs two key principles: firstly, Critical Race Theory (CRT), a wide reaching, cross-disciplinary theory which examines how the media and legislation, as well as social and political movements, are shaped by both race and ethnicity. Founded in America in the 1970s, more recently this theory has come under some criticism (Delgado and Stefancic, 2012). Secondly, it uses TRAAC, which stands for Teaching, Relationship, Activity and Assessment, and Content. Though TRAAC has been used before in connection to decolonisation and teaching in higher education (p.232), in this context the model provide some meaningful prompts to help instigate deeper reflections of, and conversations around, decolonisation by way of supporting colleagues to start a productive dialogue.

Chapter One opens with a broad conversation of decolonisation within the curriculum and Chapter Two sets out the principles for good development. While Chapter Two did feel like a slight divergence from the main topic of conversation, the second part of the chapter provided an interesting context and advocated authentic discussions on the topic of decolonisation. This chapter, and the rest of the book, upholds the belief that it is okay to ask questions and acknowledges there will be a variety of views. The text advocates having a safe space to embrace potentially difficult conversations. Though a side-line to the initial topic of discussion, it is this chapter that I would be most likely to recommend for others to read, given the case studies from students: this felt impactful and had the widest relevancy. Having introduced TRAAC and its complexities within Chapter Three here there is a detailed and thorough outline introducing the model and its merits.

The remaining five chapters each takes one element of TRAAC to support decolonisation within a higher education context. Chapter Seven looks at the topic of trust between students and academics and the impact this can have on the power dynamics of a classroom, which can be addressed, as suggested, by different teaching approaches. Chapter Eight summarises the implementation of TRAAC across a variety of disciplines.

Summary

The book moves between talking about language and curriculum content to technology and how this can support decolonisation. At points it widens the conversation to cover the topic of belonging within an educational institution and the time old conversation of engagement with the institution by working alongside students and creating a positive experience of higher education. The text encompasses a plethora of topics that need to be addressed to support the decolonisation of higher education and facilitating learning, from staff's unconscious bias to the hierarchy within a classroom, to the lack of representation of members of the BAME community in the senior leadership teams. Having sections written by students makes the book an incredibly holistic account of working towards equality, furthering the concept of students facilitating and shaping their own learning.

Overall, a wealth of knowledge, experience and devotion has gone into the writing; every possible avenue has been explored and reflected upon in order to support learning development. The book strikes a hopeful and ambitious tone, looking for widespread and

radical change to higher education systems, supporting both academics, professional services staff, and students.

References

Delgado, R. and Stefancic, J. (2012) *Critical race theory: an introduction*. 2nd edn. New York: New York University Press.

Author details

Donna Gundry is the Head of Library Services at the country's newest university, Arts University Plymouth. She has over a decade of experience within higher education libraries and has seen the pedagogy changes that have arisen during this time. This resulted in her achieving both her CILIP fellowship in 2020 and Senior HEA fellowship in 2022. She is an active member of the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion committee and recently presented her departmental projects connected to decolonisation at both SWRLS and ARLIS annual conferences in 2022.

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