

The decolonising reading list, a vessel of agency, voice and belonging for all

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Over the last decade the call to decolonise the reading list, library catalogues, classification schemes, spaces and collections has gained momentum. Issues raised through campaigns like “Rhodes must fall”, “Why isn’t my professor Black?” and “Why is my curriculum white?” were brought into sharp focus in

2020 with the murder of George Floyd and Black Lives Matter. In academia the need for library collections to truly reflect our diverse academic community and acknowledge colonial legacies expressed through the knowledge they house has gained traction.

At De Montfort University, Leicester we are working to build an anti-racist university through “Decolonising DMU,” a project expanding the “Freedom to Achieve” initiative which focused on the curriculum and worked to close the awarding gap experienced by students of colour. The library plays a key role in both projects, raising awareness of issues and needs through workshops, presentations, discussions and “Read to debate.” Works by authors, artists and researchers of colour are headlined via bi-monthly themed displays, opportunities for students of colour to experience library work and change representation within the profession are offered. An exploration of the use and experience of Library services and spaces by students of colour compared to that of white students is ongoing and a workshop enabling academics to review, rethink and re-imagine their reading lists has been developed. By gaining space for thinking and discussion, plus tools to enable action, academics can audit and acknowledge their list composition and kick start discussions with colleagues and/or students. By considering why reading lists look as they do and thinking how to redress the balance, academics can work towards decolonising their lists.

A critique of diversifying library collections is that of a check list approach. It is not enough for library collections to contain a more diverse range of materials, this knowledge must be used and situated within the academic discourse. This more authentic approach to

decolonising positions previously hidden voices in the classroom or curriculum and gives agency to students of colour, who can now see themselves reflected in the curriculum and feel a better sense of connection with the discipline. Such representation helps to build identity and recognition of belonging and value within the academic community. To address decolonising, conversations within and outside of the classroom may:

- Question the composition of reading lists,
- Acknowledge the colonial legacy of the canon
- Question the omission of certain voices and frames of knowledge
- Imagine what the discipline would look like if new frames of knowledge were embedded.
- Students can thus be encouraged to identify and acknowledge gaps in voice and representation.

A main strand of library work within Decolonising DMU is the work around decolonising the reading list. A workshop has been developed and delivered across the university and is embedded within the Post Graduate certificate of academic practice, a qualification taken by all new lecturers. This workshop's objectives are:

- To set out the need for decolonising
- To explore the pedagogic purpose and benefits of reading lists
- To offer tools to review and re-imagine reading lists in a co-creative way with colleagues and students.

The workshop enables attendees to share thoughts and practices; many examples of co-creating culturally inclusive reading lists with students are given, and everyone learns from each other. The workshop offers potential resources to explore and identify a more diverse or global knowledge base for reading lists. Tools offered include auditing, referencing the work at Manchester Metropolitan University, University of Arts London and Kent University. The visual audit technique of the intersectionality matrix of Stockdale (University of Northumbria) and Sweeney (York St. John University) is offered as a co-creative method of enabling students or colleagues to see the diversity (or lack) in a discipline or reading list and to consider the meaning and impact of the bias. Academics are invited to complete a brief analysis of core theorists or mandatory texts using this tool. Many are surprised by the results and start to think about how to reshape this representation. University of Arts London guidelines for decolonising the reading list are offered as a means of exploring what a decolonising reading list is and steps to develop one.

Delivered through Microsoft Teams, the atmosphere of the workshop is collegiate and positive. Those who work on accredited professional courses where materials are influenced by a governing professional body express concern of a lack of representation but acknowledge the challenge of decolonising their reading list. Tools such as co-creation in the classroom, the use and sharing of lived experiences (embodied knowledge), less traditional "authoritative" sources such as blogs, podcasts, films, documentaries, may be brought into the classroom to raise issues and give other voices space and consideration. Students may be invited to bring their own choice of voices into this arena in a move to give agency and value

to all members of the academic community. By enabling students to situate given knowledge, to ask where it has come from, whose voice is represented, the position and power of the knowledge creators and disseminators, to ask what voices are missing, forms a tool of empowerment and agency as well as a lifelong graduate skill.

This workshop, like decolonising, is evolving as issues and needs become clearer. The approach remains one of collaboration between Librarians, academics and students, to generate essential discussions around what is decolonising, what does it look like? How does it apply to me and my subject and what can I do to facilitate it? Feedback from the workshop reflects an appreciation of a space to discuss these issues, share practice and take a practical approach to theoretical concepts. Librarians may fear being asked to produce a “decolonised” reading list, but by working together, promoting and advocating for diverse and inclusive materials in the collection and the curriculum, we can start to bring authenticity and inclusivity to the classroom and the library.

These views are the authors’ own and do not necessarily reflect the views of UKSG.



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