Decolonising Your Course Toolkit – Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences Courses

This toolkit is designed to guide you through decolonising your Scholars Programme course.

There are many reasons we might seek to decolonise our curricula. The first and most pressing for many is the moral and ethical imperative to share the perspectives and provide room for the voices of those who have been silenced and sidelined. There is also an intellectual imperative – as scholars we make claims often about how our work fills gaps in our understanding, questions the status quo, and provides new understandings of old problems. Pedagogically, there is an imperative to provide material to students that they can relate to and connect with – it is often said that 'if you can see it you can be it'. On the Scholars Programme, we want to inspire the students to imagine any future for themselves, regardless of background, and part of this should be presenting them with courses where they can see themselves represented positively.

Decolonisation is something that has sometimes been misunderstood in the news media as being about removing White authors and adding token Black figures into courses. This is not the aim of **decolonising,** which is the process of seeking out and eradicating assumptions based on colonial values or habits and instead providing thorough and accurate context and a more comprehensive perspective on topics and issues. It is also different from **diversifying**, which is a more simple process of adding to the curriculum to include more perspectives, focussing particularly on those of underrepresented backgrounds. **Decolonising** goes deeper, into the assumptions we make and the approaches we take.

The **decolonisation** of curricula is an ongoing process rather than a simple goal. As scholarship, cultural and political understanding of the legacy of colonisation evolves, so will understanding of what it means to design, teach and revise material to provide rigorous and thoroughly decolonised courses to our students. We appreciate that this process may be new for you, as it is for many of us, and so we have provided this toolkit to help you work through getting started on the process.

If you do one thing…

If you do one thing, ensure you understand the historical and cultural context of your research. Do you have a critical understanding of the historical context of the key concepts/research in your course? Do you know how **colonialism** may have affected both scholarly and popular understanding of identities (national, individual, racial, community, and more), collections in museums and works of art, and which pieces of literature or culture are considered 'canonical'?

The rest of this toolkit includes some big questions to ask of your course, some practical tips, information on further reading/resources and a glossary. We have also included an appendix with some further reading.

Contents

Questions to consider

Question	Example
Are there 'core' or 'canonical' works of culture that you have in your course that you could replace with works of culture that tell less commonly represented stories, or the voices and perspectives of a more diverse group of people?	If you are working on romanticism, are all of your examples from Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley and Byron? Can you find more contemporary texts to compare with? Can you encourage students to see literary endeavour and sensitivity are something that is not just the preserve of upper-class white men?
Do the scholars and the scholarship that you are using rely on any colonial assumptions that need to be challenged?	Do any of the thinkers or scholars you are using in another context, for your topic, elsewhere espouse views that we might now consider racist or otherwise discriminatory? If so you can add a context note for students. For example, the philosopher David Hume expressed racist beliefs about white supremacy in some footnotes of his work. While Hume would not need to be removed from any given course, it would be useful to students to have some context on his beliefs. Ask yourself: does your course demonstrate that we can use the work of past thinkers without idolising them or accepting all of their views wholesale, and acknowledging the complexities of them as people? Especially if your topic covers issues of race or identity, can you identify colonial assumptions within scholarship and draw students' attention to them, so that they can engage with them critically?
Are the lives and pasts of the students you may teach represented? Are the reading lists sufficiently diverse? If not, why not?	For example, if you are teaching a course on Shakespeare, you may wish to incorporate interpretations from around the world, and to make sure you are using criticism from a wide range of scholars? It is not always possible to include every perspective, but be prepared to speak to students about why. When putting together your reading list, use the first names so that students can see more about the gender and demographic spread of the authors.

How has progress been depicted and who is left out/silenced?	Particularly in a field where there is any kind of 'canon' (music, theatre, literature, art), can you identify and challenge any ideas about cultural superiority, and who is worthy of study? Remind the students that the course itself is just a selection of resources around one topic, and does not and cannot reflect the true diversity of the past or the contemporary world around them. As you can't explore all perspectives, you can still encourage pupils to consider why certain people or stories are more well known, even if you don't have the answers yourself.
Can you identify and then eradicate or challenge stereotypes about different groups?	If you are reading a text- or image-based source, draw students' attention to the use of stereotypes. Help students develop their critical thinking skills in challenging how the group is represented. Draw attention to instances of outdated language and explain the context and how and why thinking on terminology has changed.
How can students see themselves reflected in positive ways in the context of your research?	Including a diverse body of researchers to create your course and to underpin activities with pupils. If the key researchers in your field are not diverse, you can engage pupils in a discussion about why this may be the case.

Practical Tips

These are a list of things you can do as practical strategies to decolonise your handbook. Not all will be applicable, but we suggest selecting at least two to try for yourself.

Task	What could you do?
Check that you have included a variety of voices	If your course provides multiple research articles or opinion pieces, does this include a variety of voices, not just those who are traditionally represented? If you are including "characters" within your handbook such as a list of names taking part in an activity, is this inclusive of different genders and cultures? If you are using works of culture, do these represent a variety of viewpoints?
Provide pupils with some context of how we got to where we are now with this research	Add "Did You Know" or "Historical Context" speech boxes to your handbook to provide pupils with additional context that you may not cover directly in your course. Add "Debates" sections where pupils can find out more about the controversies or challenges within the field, and can see different perspectives.
If your course provides historical context, check whose version of events is told	Is the narrative you are sharing a **Eurocentric** view? If so, have you explained why for the pupils? Were there other important figures who you could discuss? Do any of the texts or sources you have shared imply that Western culture is superior or a particular race or group has always been dominant? If so, have you planned an activity or discussion to critically engage students with why this is the case?
Use the homework tasks to broaden pupils' understanding of the historical or cultural debates in the discipline	Are there any controversies or examples from within your discipline that you could encourage the students to engage with? For example, in medieval history the term 'Anglo-Saxon' is often used to refer erroneously to the language, literature and culture of Early England when this was not the term the people then used to refer to themselves – they simply called themselves 'English', and the term 'Anglo-Saxon' has a long history of being used in a racially charged manner. Topics like these don't have to be in the handbook, but having the knowledge to hold these conversations with pupils will support their understanding that when we are dealing with these disciplines, there is no single narrative that cannot be challenged, but a constant process of investigation, revision and scholarly conversation.

Glossary

Word	Definition	In a sentence
Colonialism	the policy or practice of acquiring full or partial political control over another country, occupying it with settlers, and exploiting it economically.	**Colonialism** has led to indigenous people to become minorities where they were once the majority, for example, the First Nation people of Canada, or the Maori of New Zealand.
Neo-colonialism	the use of economic, political, cultural, or other pressures to control or influence other countries, especially former dependencies.	Instead of direct military control, **neo-colonialism** relies on conditional aid and cultural pressures to control countries that previously were colonised. For example, this includes financial organisations that offer loans or economic aid that are conditional on the recipient countries implementing practices and steps that may harm their economies.
Imperialism	a policy of extending a country's power and influence through colonization, use of military force, or other means.	Often, colonialism and **imperialism** are used synonymously, but more accurately, **imperialism** is the practice of ruling informed by the theory of colonialism.
Decolonisation	the action or process of a state withdrawing from a former colony, leaving it independent.	**Decolonisation** refers to the withdrawal of imperialism from colonised countries. In addition, the definition has expanded to include 'freeing of minds from colonial ideology'.
Eurocentric	focusing on European culture or history to the exclusion of a wider view of the world; implicitly regarding European culture as pre-eminent.	The history of mathematics is often told in a **Eurocentric** way, focusing on the works of, often white, European males.
Eugenics	is a movement aimed at improving the genetic composition of the human race. Eugenicists, in history, advocated selective breeding to achieve these goals.	**Eugenics** was popular in the early 1900s and was used as reasoning for many horrific atrocities that occurred. Including Hitler's belief in creating a superior race, and mass sterilisations that took place.

Appendix I – Different Perspectives

Here are some examples of what a decolonised course might say.

Eurocentric and Colonised:	Decolonised Narrative:
The Vikings were a Scandinavian people who were very successful navigators, pillagers and, eventually, settlers. They had a strong warrior culture and were very dominant during the early medieval period.	The Vikings were a very diverse group of people, defined by what they did (travelling by sea and raiding and settling in new countries) rather than by ethnicity. Vikings were not all white, and we have good reason to believe that women took part in the travelling and fighting as well as being an important part of settling and integrating in new countries.
Planned activity before decolonising:	**Revised and Decolonised Version:**
Read the excerpt from "Devil in a White City" and consider the following questions: 1. How is the World Fair described? 2. Why do you think someone would want to attend? 3. What can the Midway Plaisance tell us about global race relations in the US in 1893? NB: The excerpt describes the Midway Plaisance as "designed to provide an education about alien cultures" and as "a great pleasure garden" and as "an exotic realm of unusual sights sounds and scents [with] authentic villages from far off lands"	If the aim of the tutorial is to interrogate race relations in the US at this time, then the prompts as stated would remain. However, a decolonised version would include some explicit interrogation of the terms used in the excerpts. The tutor could plan to discuss why the use of "exotic" is a problematic term today or explicitly engage with how exotic isn't just a synonym for different, but is wrapped up in assumptions about power, "other" and creates a civilised v. uncivilised paradigm. A fourth question could be added along the lines of: What language in the excerpt lets readers know that Midway Plaisance is "othered"? OR – What do you think of when you came across terms like "exotic realm" or "pleasure garden" to describe people exhibiting their countries?
Eurocentric and Colonised:	**Decolonised Narrative:**
Not only do we have a long history of democratic decision making, our type of democracy – the parliamentary democracy – has been exported, enforced and adopted by many countries in the world.	The British Empire enforced its version of democracy in the nations that it colonised. And some of those nations, though independent states today, still operate under the same system of government.

Appendix II - Further Reading/Resources

Please note, this further reading is less about practical strategies and more a list of resources to get you thinking about what decolonising your course might mean for your own area of expertise by engaging with the questions raised in the works below.

Articles – Short Reads
Advance HE: Decolonisation of the Curriculum – a Conversation Dr Katherine Haxton, Senior Lecturer in Chemistry at Keele University, Dr Neil Williams, Director of Undergraduate Studies in the Faculty of Science Engineering and Computing at Kingston University, Dr Caroline Garaway Senior Lecturer in the Department of Anthropology at University College London and Anne Kimunguyi who is studying history, also at UCL discuss the hows and whys of decolonising the curriculum. **How Diverse is your History Curriculum?** A resource for primary-school teachers with a clear, simple checklist for sense-checking your History curriculum for colonial assumptions. **Kingston University London: Inclusive Curriculum Framework** A practical guide to make sure curricula are inclusive. **Wonkhe: How not to Decolonise your Curriculum** Following on from the Sewell Report, this blog post draws attention to and guides against some of the common pitfalls of decolonising efforts.
Longer reads
SOAS Decolonising Learning and Teaching Toolkit A thorough and practical resource developed by SOAS for its staff that guides through how you might decolonise a university module. **HEPI Debate Paper 23 - Mia Liyanage: Miseducation: decolonising curricula, culture and pedagogy in UK universities** A long but very useful discussion of some of the issues surrounding the decolonisation of the curriculum, including some recommendations.

Books

***The Brutish Museums*, Professor Dan Hicks**
Published in 2021, this book focuses, as a case study, on the Benin Bronzes. Taken from the palace of the King of Benin City, Nigeria, the Bronzes have been in the British Museum since 1897, despite repeated requests from the Oba people to have them returned. This book looks more widely at the colonial history of museums and the debate around objects like these, held in This book holds the rare distinction of having been recommended on twitter by M.C. Hammer.

***Natives*, Akala**
A 2019 British book by the rapper Akala. Part memoir, the book provides race and class analysis of a variety of historical eras, in addition to contemporary British society. This book is a modern take of colonialism and how this continues to impact modern Britain. In particular, there is a theme throughout of colonialism and 'British racism' in an education context. This is an accessible and important read to fully appreciate the extent of how colonialism continues impacts society today.

***Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men*, Caroline Criado-Perez**
An account of the data-gap in society in terms of gender and the far reaching implications. While this is not focused on colonisation or race, the implications of excluding half the population in data-modelling and decision making shows how important representation and decolonisation as a theory are to everything including medicine, safety regulations and transport. However, this book approaches this issue in a binary way and has been widely criticised for excluding non-binary and trans people and being biologically inaccurate in it's description of X and Y chromosomes, this is worth keeping in mind when you read this book.

Disclaimer: Not an exhaustive list! Please share any Decolonising books and resources you have that you think would be helpful to tutors.

Videos

Chimamanda Adichie – The danger of a single story (18 mins)

'Decolonising Education: The challenge of Whiteness' (1h 39mins)

Podcasts

We Need to Talk About the British Empire - Hosted by Afua Hirsch, (author of Brit(ish)) podcast discusses how the legacy of the British Empire continues to shape our lives, and sense of collective identity today.

In Search of Black History with Bonnie Greer - Bonnie Greer uncovers the lives of people of African descent that don't fit with the accepted history of Western Civilisation we've traditionally been taught.

Other resources

Twitter:

@CurriculumBlack

@DecoloniseSOAS

@DecoloniseUoM

@DecoloniseQMUL

Decolonise Contraception @DecoloniseContr

Decolonise EDUCATION @DecoloniseUKC

Decolonise not diversify! @decoloniseveryt

Decolonial Subversions @_decolonise

White Spaces Project @SpacesWhite

Websites:

- https://theblackcurriculum.com/
- https://decolonisestem.home.blog/
- *Decolonial Subversions* is a newly established open access, multilingual, peer-reviewed publishing platform committed to the decentring of western epistemology www.decolonialsubversions.org

Future Learn Short Courses:

Decolonising Education: From Theory to Practice – 4 weeks, 3 hours

Teaching Black British History: A Teacher Training Guide – 3 weeks, 3 hours