



NAVIGATING THE ‘DECOLONISING’ PROCESS: AVOIDING PITFALLS AND SOME DO’S AND DON’T’S

By [discoversociety](#) February 06, 2019 0 Comment 2019, Articles, DS65

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Decolonising the University and / or decolonising the curriculum (DTU/C) has come to occupy a contested space in recent debates. The need to change not only curricula but the University system is borne of a long standing problem of institutional discrimination. There is no shortage of **evidence** of racial and ethnic inequality within higher education. As a number of student led movements around the globe have actively sought acknowledgement of the West’s collusion in the colonial power relations that then shape education (e.g. **Rhodes Must Fall Oxford** and **South Africa, “Why is my curriculum White” at UCL and Leeds**), there can often be confusion about what decolonizing might mean. **Meera Sabaratnam (2017)** sums up some possible interpretations of what decolonizing curricula might mean for the uninitiated: Exploring shared assumptions about how the world “is” (in relation to a global colonial history), and how and why it came to be this way; the “relationship between the identity of the writer, what they write and how they write about it” and what a more diverse student and staff body might mean, as institutions reflect wider societies they are located and embedded within.

Rather than rule out knowledge that has developed in Western Europe and North America, it seeks to situate it as produced *in relation to* the range of knowledges outside of European thinkers, and as *a result of* colonial and imperial and power (Bhambra **2014**; Grosfuogel **2013**). The point of DTU/C is to co-produce an intellectual and academic endeavour that embodies *inclusivity* and re-positions who and what gets to occupy the centre and the margins of ideas and society, and re-balance power. There have been **backlashes** to the DTU/C momentum, with **vigorous responses**. Suffice to say what is at stake here is *the position of knowledge itself* – who and what gets marked out as **‘identity’ politics**, and who and what simply recedes into the background of normalised systems of **whiteness** and mainstream knowledge.

This piece is partly a lighter hearted look at this important discussion, but with a serious

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attention: to explore the ***structural and systemic logics*** that create and maintain these positions in the first place, which are then consciously or unintentionally used. Rather than reflecting individuals or individual statements, the steps below reflect how *ways of thinking and responding* can become embedded and normalised into *positions* we might at some point in institutional life find ourselves taking, often without realising the implications.

Step 1: Don’t use the terms ‘diversity’, ‘inclusivity’ and ‘attainment’ instead of talking about structural racism, neo-colonial narratives, and institutionally embedded bias. These terms and initiatives have a place in wider, institutional frameworks but when used as substitutes for structural racism and gender discrimination, they remain impotent, relegated to outer reaches of higher education business. The inequalities **data** has been in for some time now, and the **racial barriers** to staff and students are established, but the consistent **manoeuvre around** racism reflects **fear** of the concept and practice. The **diversity agenda** and the way in which institutional processes gloss over, ignore, and simplify important **intersectional inequalities** has been written about elsewhere. So there is a need to name what needs to be done, which requires a willingness to accept one’s complicity in what has been going on. As Probyn-Ramsey quotes: “if we start with complicity, we recognize our “proximity to the problems we are addressing” (quoted in **Ahmed 2012: 6**).

Do ask: What power structures that I am involved in, more often than not roped into, where decolonising is actively ignored, can I help to dismantle? By not talking about racism, who is left out and what becomes normalised?

Step 2: Don’t say: “It’s really not my area...I don’t know anything about this...” Perhaps. But this is about more than something being outside of one’s knowledge boundaries. It is about the nature of knowledge itself, and what we, as academics come to accept as normalised, central, mainstream, and therefore ‘*worth knowing*’. For example, every social science academic position requires a high level of knowledge at broad and deep levels, spanning not only their own specific expertise but also in other related fields and disciplines (these are *essential* criteria for most academic positions). Why then is the vast range of social science, research, philosophy and theory that currently exist *outside* of these criteria *not* part of what a social scientist *should* know or be interested in? Social science training, learning and teaching all treat postcolonial and decolonial knowledge as ‘other’. To adopt a position of not-knowing, necessarily requires an unspoken, sub/unconscious adoption of knowing *something*, and placing that knowledge as foremost in a hierarchy of knowledges.

Do ask: What have I assumed about what is worth knowing?

Step 3: Don’t ask: “Can’t the person of colour / specific gender do it? I haven’t got time.” If it takes prolonged periods of intellectual and embodied labour for *any* in-depth knowledge, why assume that the DTU/C project should fall on the shoulders of people who will be double-burdened with the task of knowing ‘mainstream’ knowledge *and* what is required for DTU/C? The question above now looks like: “*It will only take a few minutes of my time to know a substantial amount of the knowledge base outside of what is ‘proper and real’ University knowledge. Please provide me with a readily digestible summary.*” The comparison is worth thinking about and reflecting on for both speakers and hearers of this question. This has labour implications for institutions and staff. To assume that the vast and diverse range of thought, writing and activism of decoloniality can and should be summarised into easily digestible and therefore less important tasks is reflective of a wider logic of colonial thinking and knowledge.

Do say: “I will go and do some reading and thinking – can I talk with you and colleagues more about this?”

Step 4: Don’t ask the question: “but I haven’t colonized anything...why do I need to do this?” Contrasting decolonising against ‘business as normal’ operations presents decolonizing as a process at the margins of society and social scientific enquiry; as something that comes from the outside, and that can and should affect only some subject positions; occupying a remedial, corrective role. Most of us accept that our lives are constituted by networks of interdependent social and cultural fabric, with individual and collective actions creating and sustaining our lives. But when it comes to DTU/C, this thinking falls by the wayside. Why? Because this position reinforces a separation in thinking, rather than through connected thinking. We all have a responsibility as members of connected historical groups, to think about who we are, how we have come to be, and how these positions operate through networks of historical and contemporary power relations. In a word, transcend ‘**methodological whiteness**’.

Do ask: When I look around me, where do networks of power coalesce and what role does colour, race, language, gender, class, disability, etc. play in this?

Step 5: Don’t ask: “If decolonizing involves bringing in all these ‘other’ ideas and writers, what about all the ‘classics’?”



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There is a plethora of work (see <https://globalsocialtheory.org>) that dismantles the misconception that White western ‘canons’ of theory are civilizational products of cultural and intellectual superiority. The ‘classics’ hold this position for a specific reason. A canonical text cannot be thus without its connection to the imperial and colonial economic enterprise on which it was based. To believe that knowledge production in the West happens in an epistemological vacuum outside of the West’s collusion with racial, gendered and economic genocide since the 16th century is a dangerous fiction to retain. Sociology as a discipline, for example, was birthed through its comparison with anthropology, which explicitly dealt with the practices of the (colonial) ‘other’, hence its focus on ‘modern’ societies (Bhambra, **2007**; **2014**). ‘Modernity’ as the discipline’s core focus is regarded as a thing in itself – unique and untangled, problematically seen *without* connection to its own complicity in racialized, gendered inequality and brutality.

Do ask: What do I understand to be a ‘classic’, or a ‘canon’ and why?

Step 6: Don’t make the statement: "There are bigger problems in the University system to deal with..."

Indeed there may well be, but again what is being said here is not as important as what is being done, and what is being ignored. Research indicates that even with institutional and national policy frameworks, staff and students alike are **still experiencing** huge barriers, obstacles and discrimination. As Universities sign up to the recent **Advance HE Charter mark**, the obvious step-in-the-right-direction signals notwithstanding, neo-liberal, corporate and bureaucratic machineries (**Holmwood and Bhambra, 2012**) assimilate this into their modus operandi. DTU/C is not a single project of liberation for a minority group. As a varied, multi-disciplinary, and social justice based campaign, it seeks to enhance and sustain the intellectual, practical academic rigour that education systems purportedly perform today. Many of these battles take place in the increasingly precarious University as sites of social and community action. There may well be bigger problems within the University system, but **only** if we think of these problems are disconnected and separate from the neo-liberalisation of society itself.

*Do think about: What conditions have brought about **my** framing of these problems as separate?*

In what ways does this connect to the other problems in the institution?

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MAGE CREDIT: Drawing from an 1879 edition of **L’Astronomie**, depicting Christopher Columbus predicting the lunar eclipse to the native Jamaicans.

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