

ACS Summer 2021 Working Group Report: “Decolonizing” the Curriculum: Tensions, Trends, and Tools

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GOALS

Prompted by increased attention to the notion of “decolonizing the curriculum” or “decolonizing academia,” a small group of faculty from six ACS institutions convened with the following goals:

1. To gather, read, and discuss foundational and recent literature on “decolonizing” the curriculum;
2. To explore distinctions and overlaps between conceptual frameworks like “decolonizing,” anti-racist pedagogy, and inclusive pedagogy;
3. To consider not only the classroom, but the curriculum itself as an important but often overlooked site for decolonizing work;
4. To examine tensions and risks embedded within “decolonizing” efforts and frameworks.
5. To create a curated and annotated reading list; develop tools for decolonizing the curriculum (e.g. Reflection questions to be used in backward design); and collect ideas for workshops or other faculty development opportunities on this topic.

RESULTS

1. The groups met five times during the summer for at least one hour, usually one and one-half hours (on 5/24, 6/14, 7/12, 7/26, and 8/2). At our first meeting, we decided to complete a combination of shared readings and individual readings based on interests and specific pedagogical or institutional needs. For two of the shared readings, we used <https://web.hypothes.is/>, a collaborative annotation tool, which allowed us to process and react to the readings together in advance of our meetings. The shared readings, in the order that we read them, included:

Tuck, Eve and K. Wayne Yang. “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1.1 (2012): 1-40.

<https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/des/article/view/18630>

Stein, Sharon et al. “Developing Stamina for Decolonizing Higher Education:

A Workbook for Non-Indigenous People” Version 2.2 March 2021.

<https://higheredotherwise.files.wordpress.com/2021/03/decolonizing-he-workbook-draft-fb2021-4.pdf>

Twyman-Ghoshal, Anamika and Danielle Carkin Lacorazza. Strategies for Anti-racist and Decolonial Teaching. Faculty Focus March 31, 2021.

<https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/equality-inclusion-and-diversity/strategies-for-anti-racist-and-decolonized-teaching/>

Mintz, Steven. “Decolonizing the Academy” *Inside Higher Ed* June 22, 2021.

<https://www.insidehighered.com/print/blogs/higher-ed-gamma/decolonizing-academy>

Appleton, Nayantara Sheoran. “Do Not ‘Decolonize’ . . . If You Are Not Decolonizing: Progressive Language and Planning Beyond a Hollow Academic Rebranding” Critical Ethnic Studies blog. Feb 4, 2019.

<http://www.criticalethnicstudiesjournal.org/blog/2019/1/21/do-not-decolonize-if-you-are-not-decolonizing-alternate-language-to-navigate-desires-for-progressive-academia-6y5sq>

2. During our meetings, we explored the distinctions and overlaps between anti-racist, inclusive, and decolonizing approaches. The relationships between these pedagogies, we came to understand, is complicated. Each is grounded in the use and distribution of power. However, decolonizing should not be confused with or conflated with anti-racist pedagogies or inclusive pedagogies more generally. They are not nested principles or practices, but instead may be incommensurate approaches. What we came to realize was that to use the word “decolonizing” in an authentic way, you have to be talking about land and the relationship one has to land. That is, you have to be talking about the ways in which white settlers and their beneficiaries plan to revoke claims to land as property and return the land to Indigenous peoples. Decolonizing cannot be a metaphor for changing minds and it is not about including Indigenous peoples or voices, but rather working to bring about an alternative relationship between people and between land and its inhabitants, an alternative not yet imagined by existing democratic constructs or agreements, all of which import Western notions of democracy and democratic engagement. Most importantly, we came to recognize the limits of our capacity to imagine or realize these alternatives and so we must approach with caution our use of decolonizing in whatever context.
3. While we never agreed on terminology to replace “decolonize” as a verb for the type of work we want to do, we recognize that the primary consideration is relationships -- to land, people, and knowledge. Appleton suggests we replace “decolonize” with other “D” actions, like diversify, digress, decentre. Whatever terminology one uses, during our conversations a tension emerged between the what and the how -- that is, the content one might include in a course or program, and pedagogy, the way one might instruct learning in a course or program. One approach involves adding more content--“diverse voices”--but another approach addresses the process or pedagogy itself, including

assessment, classroom climate, and knowledge creation. For example, at the level of student product, we want to acknowledge and reward various forms of knowledge production, presentation, and dissemination, including forms not usually recognized by the academy as “legitimate.” We talked, too, about how this acknowledgement might extend to institutional policies, for example, around promotion and tenure: to what extent do the valued forms of scholarship reflect colonial structures and premises and fail to recognize Indigenous forms of knowledge creation, preservation, and production?

4. In the end, our discussions and readings helped us better understand the tensions and risks embedded in a decolonizing framework. Specifically, the group recognized the ways in which we, as members of residential liberal arts institutions, are beneficiaries of a white settler colonial system and so challenging that system risks our own privilege and self-identity. A key concept we encountered was the “move to innocence,” through which an individual with privilege seeks to position themselves as innocent, perhaps as oppressed but never the oppressor. For example, Tuck and Yang point out that, by calling all oppressed groups colonized, this obscures the specific relationships between the colonizer, the metropole, and the colonized. With such a move we protect our self-image and abdicate our responsibility. By shifting the conversation away from colonial power relations and onto our own personal innocence, we avoid the real work of changing social and political structures.
5. Initially, the group imagined it might be able to create an annotated list of readings. However, as we worked, such a creation felt unnecessary, even impossible. More importantly, it would signal that we had somehow “mastered” this area, which we have not, nor will we. Additionally, each participant pursued a line of inquiry unique to their needs or interests, which informed our general conversations and discussion of the shared topics. Likewise, we did not feel we were positioned to develop a workshop on decolonizing, despite our reading and exploration this summer. Instead of a list of readings or a series of workshops, then, we have produced two items: a set of reflective questions, which we modeled on questions that appear in the Decolonizing Workbook, and individual reflections about our learning this summer. Each of these products are discussed in more detail in the next section of the report.

PRIMARY PRODUCT

Reflective question tool

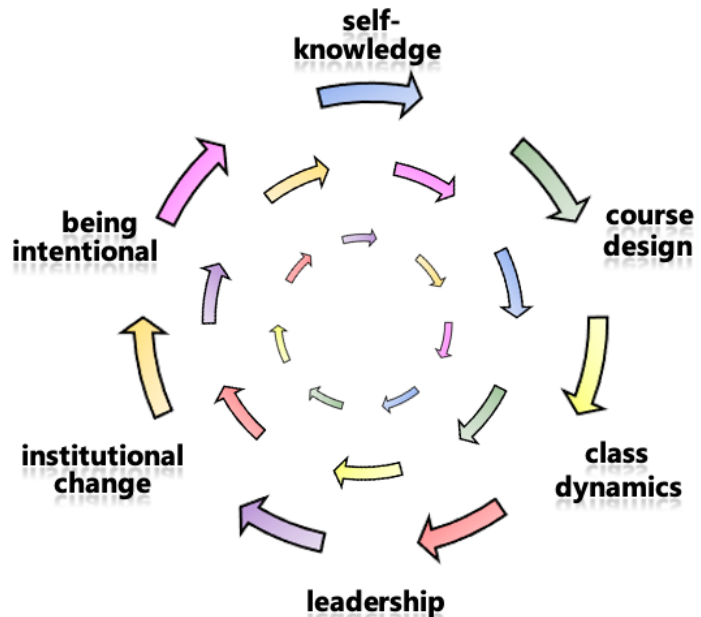
We developed a reflection tool that poses a series of questions an individual, department, or institution might ask when beginning the long process of decentering dominant pedagogies, curricula, and structures. Some people will be inclined to enter the tool at the most abstract level (administration, institutional-levels), others will want to begin on the personal, individual level. Both entry points are appropriate. Either way, both areas of inquiry and reflection are necessary.

A Reflection Tool for Advancing Equity Work in Higher Education

This tool is intended to spark reflection, conversation, and ultimately, action, as part of a larger process of bringing an equity lens and advancing equity work in academia. It encourages reflection about oneself and about larger systems. It recognizes that asking questions is as important -- if not more important -- than having answers. It also acknowledges that this work is never complete and must be continuous.

Thus, the tool is not intended to be a linear list of steps but is, rather, a cyclical and repeating process that can be entered at any point.

The reflection questions, drawn from other sources and from communal reading and discussion, are the products of the summer 2021 Associated Colleges of the South working group focused on “decolonizing” the curriculum. (As part of our summer study, we learned that “decolonizing” is a contested and misused term, so we have chosen not to use it metaphorically [Tuck & Yang 2012] and instead to focus on the project of advancing equity in higher education.)



Being Intentional

- How do I maintain a focus on systems of power and oppression and not slip into politically inert/harmful approaches of multiculturalism/identity representations? How do we maintain a self-reflexive focus on the intended and implicit aims of the educational program (exercise, course, program, college, institution)?
- What are my motivations for practicing equity? Is it for self-validation? For whose benefit? How do I know?
- How do the questions in this tool prompt me to think/act differently, or not, regarding my responsibility for advancing equity in my work?

Self-Knowledge

- Who am I? In what ways do I benefit from privilege?
- How do I think about “difference”? What does “difference” mean to me?
- When discomfort strikes, how do I feel? How do I move through the discomfort or “lean into it” rather than running away from it?
- How do I typically respond to challenges or feedback from students and colleagues? How would I like to improve my responses?
- How do I feel when there is conflict, between students or between myself and a student? Are there ways that I can prepare for conflict so that it becomes part of the learning?

- How do I feel about navigating the authority that comes with being in a position of power? Is this comfortable or uncomfortable and for whom?
- What power and privileges do I hold? How do these privileges and powers show up in my life and work? How might they take up space and silence others?
- What assumptions might some people make about me, my authority, and my relationship with others based on my identity?
- How equipped/prepared do I feel to support the specific needs of students and colleagues of color?
- How equipped/prepared do I feel to identify and respond to comments and behaviors (even unintentional ones) that may advance systems of oppression? What holds me back?
- How much of a priority is equity for me? Where does it factor into my core values? How far am I willing to go in order to serve the principle of equity? What am I willing to lose?
- Which students do I think I educate most effectively? Least effectively? What do my responses to the above reveal about my assumptions?

Course Design

- In what ways does the class organization and structure challenge or reinforce systems of power that privilege certain groups and ways of knowing?
- In what ways do intersecting systems of power shape my classroom and the context for learning? Whose interests do those systems serve? To what extent might the hidden curriculum of a course or program be construed as serving...
 - political system of settler nation state (occupation and state-sanctioned violence)
 - economic system of capitalism
 - epistemological system of universal knowledge
 - ecological system of extractivism
 - relational system of individualism and inequality
 - white supremacy/racism
 - patriarchy/sexism
 - ableism
 - heterosexism/homophobia
 - classism/capitalism
- How does the class organization and structure communicate the values of dialogic learning, resiliency in the face of challenge, and curious civil discourse?
- When I imagine a “good” student, what traits come to mind? In what ways do my biases impact what I see? How does that shape my choices about course design? Relatedly, who are my students? What are they bringing to the class right now? What assumptions am I making about them?
- In what ways might I shift the tone of the syllabus to challenge the hierarchies of knowledge and authority that often characterize this document? In other words, how can I provide enough structure to offer purpose and security to the class but also invite the students to develop agency and have a sense of empowerment?
- How have I included diverse voices in my assigned reading? Have I included the first names of the authors, which often convey the gender, national, and ethnic identities of

authors? How are those authors integrated into the syllabus and not included as “add-on diversity” readings?

- How does my syllabus provide students opportunities to choose assignments that are comfortable to them and also assignments that challenge them?
- Especially with regard to grading, how can I build in grade-bearing activities and assignments that draw on the diverse backgrounds, areas of expertise and experience, and forms of knowledge and intelligence that my students offer, especially in ways that benefit the class as a whole?
- What messages does my syllabus send about how I feel about students and their development as scholars and human beings?

Class Dynamics

- What am I feeling comfortable with and/or anxious about with regard to this class? What are the conversations I should have with my peers and/or reading I should do to figure out the source of my concern and how I might address it?
- In what areas can I invite dialogue with students rather than issuing commands?
- In what ways do I rely on the structures of academic power in my teaching? For instance, how do students address me? Where do I sit or stand? How is the room arranged? Are these structures of academic power important to me and in what way? Are they important in my institution and in what way?
- How does classroom engagement foster resilience and bravery and avoid denial, evasion, and “moves to innocence” (Tuck and Yang) for everyone? In other words, do activities and interactions avoid easy answers to complex problems?
- When and how do I invite feedback or consultation about processes underway in the class? What do I do with that feedback?
- How do I reframe curiosity and inquiry as non-colonial practice? How do I allow for and value various ways of “knowing” and demonstrating knowledge?
- How do I demonstrate awareness and acknowledgement of my position as “authority figure” and work to share power with students in the service of equitable classroom relationships?
- How do I both help students acquire the tools that make them legible to power structures while also acknowledging the tools they already have? What kinds of assessments, activities, classroom structures are in place?
- In what ways am I setting conditions for students to build “the capacity to work through complexity, uncertainty, contradiction, and complicity”? ([Developing Stamina](#) p.15)
- How am I transparent about the reasons and goals behind my teaching, acknowledging that it might be different from what students have experienced in the past?
- How do I provide opportunities for students to practice in an iterative way throughout the semester?

Leadership

- Given my position, what are my responsibilities and opportunities for advancing equity?
- How can I mentor other faculty members and/or help colleagues navigate the terrain of power-asymmetry in institutions?

- When mentoring minoritized faculty and staff members, especially in the role of department chair, how can I not only offer support but also contribute to conditions that ensure equity and empowerment?
- How can I advocate for and participate in successful searches that increase the number of faculty members from diverse backgrounds, including indigenous applicants?
- How do I monitor the curriculum of my department or program to ensure it reflects the core values of diversity and inclusion?
- How do I prompt changes to make clear that minoritized faculty, staff, and students are welcome and valued as co-learners and co-teachers in all aspects?

Institutional Change

- In what ways can we incentivize and reward faculty and staff initiatives to redesign courses, assignments, and other student experiences in light of the teaching and learning scholarship related to decolonization and anti-racism?
- How do we make clear to all members of the community that this work is a priority and part of the mission of the school?
- How can we create positions and/or support those in positions (in all areas of the institution) who are from minoritized/indigenous populations?
- How can we invite discussion with and respond to the experiences of minoritized members of the community?
- How can we productively and meaningfully recognize our history within settler culture and within the history of racism in the United States?