RaY

Research at the University of York St John

Decolonising the Curriculum: What is it? Why do it?

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Session Aims

Define and explain decolonisation and anti-racist pedagogy

Insight into the impact of decolonising the curriculum

Knowledge is socially constructed

- Knowledge is socially constructed:

- Influenced by:
  - Biography – Personal experiences (primary and secondary forms of socialisation)
  - Who teaches us – Teachers/lecturers etc
  - What we are taught – Curriculum/ policy of government!

What is Decolonising the Curriculum

- Decolonising the curriculum is an ongoing process that –

  - Reassesses and disrupts the arguments and assumptions of Western and colonial-focused thought across all disciplines.

  - Reframes traditional Eurocentric and Western-centric curricula and challenges hierarchies of knowledge.
    - Why are certain topics taught and others not?

  - Calls for greater awareness and consideration of the historical and cultural context in which knowledge is disseminated.
    - Who controls knowledge? Journals/ Governments etc
    - How is knowledge used? What kind of research (quant v qual) is valued – policy making?
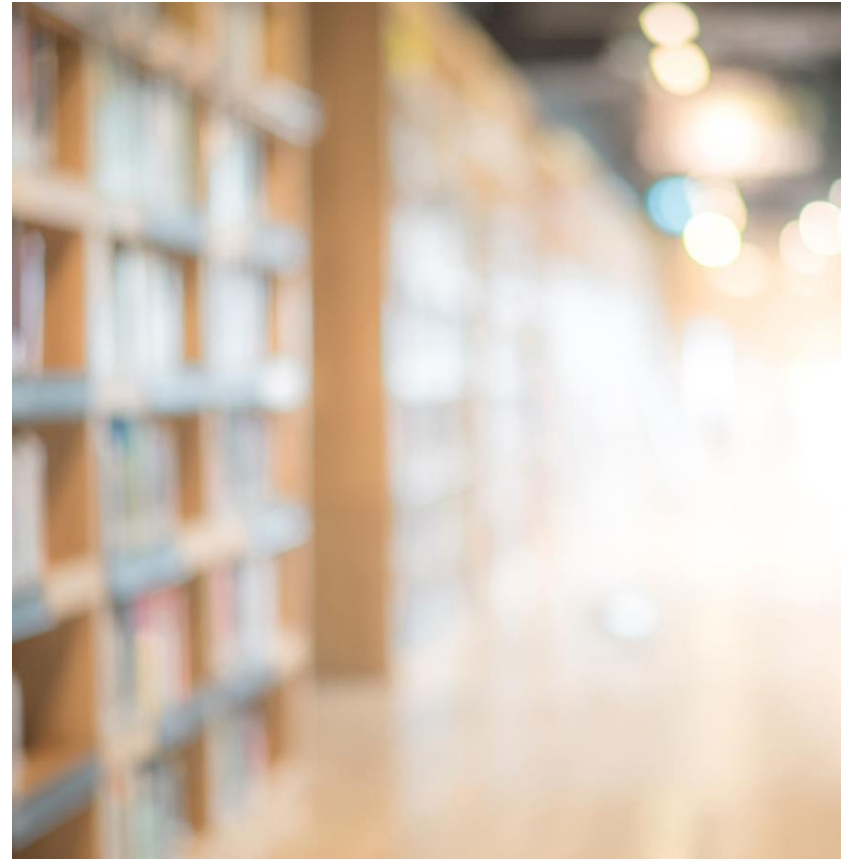
What is Decolonising the Curriculum?
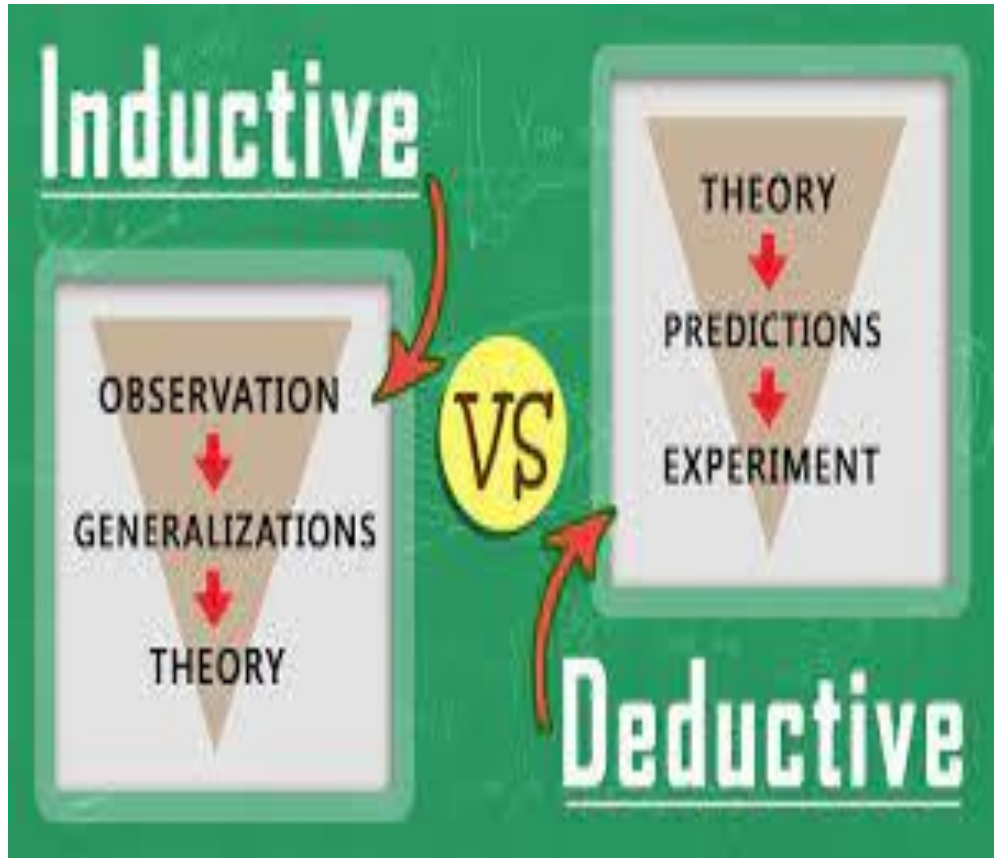
- Knowledge systems are marked by existing power relations rooted within a history of colonialism

    - Knowledge based on European norms and values

- European epistemologies present White, global Northern intellectual traditions as universal and superior

    - The West is seen as the centre of knowledge creation

- These trends continue to be reinforced by White dominance and privilege and the continued stereotyping and prejudice of non-Western forms of knowledge

    - Linked to deductive forms of logic

Inductive

OBSERVATION → GENERALIZATIONS → THEORY

VS

Deductive

THEORY → PREDICTIONS → EXPERIMENT

Anti-Racist Pedagogy

- Anti-racist, or decolonial, pedagogy is teaching that challenges exclusionary practices that **promote**, **reinforce** and **reproduce** dominant forms of knowledge.

  - Introducing a wide array of knowledge – not just Western canon – epistemic justice

- Anti-racist pedagogy should move beyond identifying racism and begin to **actively oppose** racism

  - Challenging policies, behaviours and beliefs that perpetuate racist ideas and actions.

- Requires careful consideration of **what is taught**, **who we are**, and **how we teach**. Should include:
  - Naming and defining key concepts to increase students' racial literacy.
  - Encouraging dialogue amongst students during taught sessions – classroom as a safe space
  - Provoke reflection on students' own experiences of privilege or discrimination.
  - Enable honest and robust conversations to develop within the classroom environment

- As Paulo Freire (1970) writes, **dialogue** is central to the project of education. Only through **the exchange of ideas and experiences** can we hope to work towards transformative change.

Why do it? The Impact and Value of Decolonising the Curriculum on University Students

The Study

- Study undertaken on students undertaking degrees in Science, Technology and Health.

- Degree content consisting of physiology, biology, therapy and quantitative psychology

- Students exposed to social justice module based on sociology, politics and philosophy
  - Three modules over three years
  - Included defining 'race' and ethnicity; 'race' and scientific essentialism; Racialised Othering, Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia

- Methods:
  - 20 semi-structured interviews
  - Participants second and third year students – plus alumni
  - Survey data collected from 74 students.
  - Purposive sampling

Findings (stats)

- Survey (n=74) – question: How important do you think it is to cover racism and racial inequalities at university?

- 57% - Extremely important (91%)

- 34% - Somewhat important

- 7% - Somewhat unimportant

- 2% - Extremely unimportant

Findings – (Qualitative Responses)

Students' understanding of race and racial inequalities before university

"I'd say I am **from a town which is very White**. **There is not a lot of diversity, so it was never like a massive conversation**. It was kind of mentioned here and there but it was never like a big thing that we learnt about…I've never been taught to an extent what it is and things like that"

"**Nothing in primary school and I don't think so in secondary school**. We had like PSHE and citizenship and that, kind of sociology which kind of slightly touched on that and that's where we did racial inequality and social inequality**. It wasn't very detailed**"

- Very limited insight pre-university
- 'Race' and racism rarely spoken about
- Lack of insight through formalised education

Students' reflections on the value and impact of decolonial and anti-racist pedagogy at University

"I **didn't necessarily see the value initially on the course because I kind of when in thinking it's a science course** and I didn't necessarily give thought to the fact that I would be exposed to people of all backgrounds, cultures, races, religions, everything. Having an **awareness of certain beliefs and values is really beneficial**… again, **it was something that I hadn't given thought to because it hadn't directly impacted me**, but I am grateful for the understanding."

"I think I've been a bit **sheltered from it [racism] and maybe I was a bit naïve to what was happening. Now, I think that it's like a wider world and not just the small bubble that I've been in**… it's kind of brought to light a bit more on a bigger scale"

"I'd say in terms of value in everyday life, I'd definitely say I'm more aware. **I'm now more aware when I'm talking about sort of racism and inequality in society with regards to race and ethnicity, just simply from the terminology I use, the way I phrase things**. It also makes you more aware, **now you pick up on it a lot more**"

- Such knowledge got students to challenge:
  - White privilege
  - Knowledge systems
  - Reflect on their own practices
  - See incidents of racism
  - Impact on future careers

Recommendations

- Students and educators could be **encouraged to reflect upon and share their own experiences of privilege and inequality** in order to develop a critical consciousness.

- Educators should provide students with **definitions and concepts** in order to enable students to use **appropriate terminology when discussing sensitive issues**.

- Educators should include **high-profile case studies** within subject resources to enable students to discuss complex and sensitive issues from an objective perspective.

- Students should be encouraged to **discuss and challenge oppressive social structures** both **inside and outside of the classroom environment** through continued support from peers and educators.

Any Questions?

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