

Resistance to anti-racist and decolonial work in higher education: reflections on discomfort

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Abstract

This opinion piece uses anecdotal theory to reflect on student and staff resistance that the authors have encountered as academics conducting research on anti-racist and decolonial pedagogies in HE. We argue that such resistance is rooted in the hegemonic logics of disciplinary canons, pedagogical norms and the university, which, when challenged and disrupted, can result in feelings of discomfort. In this context, we recommend the creation of spaces to experience and learn from discomfort both productively and safely, by means of an embodied approach.

Keywords: anecdotes, anti-racist pedagogies, decolonisation, embodiment, safe spaces

Introduction

While United Kingdom higher education (HE) institutions and staff are increasingly engaged in projects on inclusive pedagogies, decolonising the curriculum, addressing awarding differentials *etc.* – at the same time *resistance* to this kind of work is common, whether by colleagues or students. Likewise, in Sara Ahmed's work on HE diversity practitioners, many participants describe the experience of "banging your head against a brick wall" as "an intrinsic part of diversity work" (2012, p.26).

In this opinion piece, we reflect (borrowing from other scholars' development and use of "anecdotal theory") on examples of resistance that we have encountered as academics conducting research on anti-racist pedagogies and decolonising HE. Anecdotes are "self-reflective narratives broadly situated within the fields of auto/ethnographies [that] capture the mundane of everyday life as well as documenting something out of the ordinary" (Lipton, 2017, p.489). They arise from "feelings, bodily reactions, and the momentary complexity of incidents deemed worth narrativizing" (Gibbs and Lehtonen 2020), allowing us to interrogate what is commonly taken for granted (Gallop 2002).

The anecdotes of student and staff resistance we recount below are fictionalised, anonymised accounts combining into one narrative multiple "real" experiences. While there are differences in the original occurrences, what struck us in the process of reflecting on and writing about them is the similarity of both the experiences and the *affects* they generated – suggesting they might also

resonate with others. Following the anecdotes, we close by reflecting on discomfort and offer some suggestions for dealing with resistance to anti-racist and decolonial work in HE.

Anecdote 1

"I don't understand why I have to engage with issues of race on this module. I don't see how it relates to the subject."

I have been teaching on this foundational module for the past four weeks now, where I have adopted an anti-racist and decolonial approach to the subject. As such, it challenges mainstream and taken-for-granted assumptions about the discipline whilst seeking to position and privilege diverse perspectives within the course design and delivery. I feel that I have built enough rapport with the students in this particular class, as they all (to varying degrees) have been engaging with the materials by sharing their opinions and asking questions. Today, we are looking at how institutional racism as a legacy of slavery and colonialism perpetuates systems of oppression and what it means for the discipline. When this student voices their opinion, a few others also chime in to agree. Some of the other students look down and avert eye contact with me. I sense an awkwardness and discomfort in the room. My heart sinks, but I smile and reply that whilst I understand that this might not seem straightforward, the content is certainly rooted in fact and relevant to their understanding of the topic – as well as of the discipline and the world around them. I do feel, though, that I have 'lost' them, as no one says much after that.

Anecdote 2

I have just delivered a presentation at an institutional teaching and learning conference, on the results of a research project on decolonial approaches to HE pedagogy. My manager has been supportive of the project, even delighting in our team having proactively 'ticked the box' of addressing ethnicity awarding differences – a current institutional priority. In the Q&A following the presentation, he raises his hand and says: 'This is all well and good, but I don't really like the word 'decolonise'. Isn't it just about good teaching?' The comment frustrates me, as the presentation I have just given has – at least in my view – made the case specifically for decolonial approaches, separately from general approaches to inclusive pedagogies. 'Did he not hear what I just said?', I think, as I try to find a way to respond to the question without showing my frustration.

My manager's resistance does not seem to arise from a place of straightforward opposition to the recommendations of the research project – in fact, he has openly supported the team in adopting some of them. At the same time, his comment reflects a common reaction to radical approaches that challenge the logics of whiteness and coloniality underpinning HE institutions and pedagogies. Before this encounter, other colleagues have challenged the project's explicit focus on race and decolonisation, telling me that it's really about class, about being a first-generation university student, or a non-native speaker of English. 'Everything starts from being poor, it's not about race, right?' one has suggested in an earlier faculty meeting.

Discussion

The types of resistance we have recounted above demonstrate the suggestion by Richard Hall and his colleagues that “the radical potential of decolonising and the revelation of whiteness in relation to the logics of coloniality, tends to be reduced to everyday, anti-racist practices, or to inclusion and diversity agendas” (2023, p.13). The appeal to “just good teaching” in the staff anecdote above appears exactly as such a move, presuming shared pedagogical norms and positioning the speaker as an authority on “good teaching”. Further, it preserves a liberal, humanist imaginary of the university as “broadly “good”” (Hall et al., 2023, p.14), seeking to protect it in the face of the challenge from decolonisation – which is to unsettle rather than complement the existing, hegemonic logics of the university. In a similar vein, the anecdote about student resistance speaks to an entrenchment in dominant ideologies and a deep-seated belief in how disciplinary canons should be taught and studied, based on Euro-centric/Western values of neutrality, objectivity and universality (Bain 2018), thus downplaying other forms of knowing (and being) that arise from feeling, intuition and emotion (Ellsworth 1989) – ultimately at the expense of “diverse histories and multi-cultural knowledge canons” (Arday et al. 2021, p.300).

From this perspective, disrupting or unsettling the hegemonic logics of our disciplines, pedagogies and the university necessarily creates feelings of discomfort amongst both students and colleagues. Whilst discomfort is to be valued – in terms of what it can tell us about our own reactions when confronted with issues of race and privilege, amongst others – spending time in and on difficult feelings also risks cultivating disengagement, disillusionment and division (Millner 2023). As such, it is crucial to create spaces where it is possible to experience and learn from discomfort productively and safely.

Such an intervention in the classroom might take the form of co-creating “safe spaces”, or what Naomi Millner calls “practice zones” (2023, p.812) where difficult conversations are “scaffolded”, and where the rules of engagement are underpinned by an ethic of care. It could also entail an “embodied approach” (Blignaut and Koopman 2020), requiring active listening and the sharing of lived experiences/realities, thus enabling subjective truths and perceptions to take a rightful place within the curriculum. In the case of staff, a similar intervention could be offered by the creation of institutional forums that allow for discussion about race, racism and coloniality, separately from the regular spaces of everyday academic work. In such spaces, discussions about race and coloniality should not be “simply diluted through the use of collective terminology such as that related to equality, diversity and inclusion more generally, but [–] given sufficient room to be discussed as standalone issues” (UUK and NUS 2019, p.44). Furthermore, it is important that senior leaders at universities lead by example and do not shy away from discussing and engaging with race and racism – despite feelings of discomfort (UUK and NUS, *op.cit.*).

Conclusion

Without the existence of initiatives and spaces that explicitly address the unease many staff and students feel when confronted with issues of racism and coloniality, universities risk leaving staff

engaged in anti-racist and decolonial projects very much on their own, as illustrated by our anecdotes above. For such staff, a consequence would be not only more “banging your head against a brick wall” (Ahmed 2012, p.26), but also the jeopardising of initiatives to decolonise and transform student learning and our institutions in the face of these repeated efforts to resist – leaving us all much the poorer for it. The time to actively embrace discomfort is now.

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