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

Dr Spencer Swain

Session Aims

Define and explain
decolonisation
and anti-racist
pedagogy

Insight into the
impact of
decolonising the
curriculum

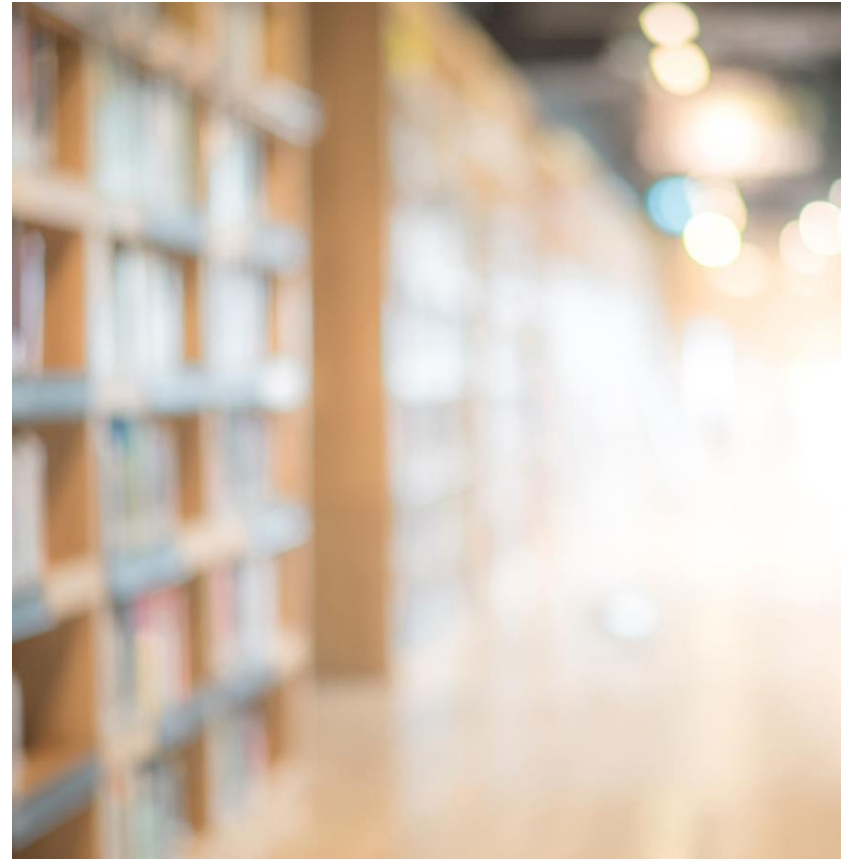
Knowledge is socially constructed

- 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!

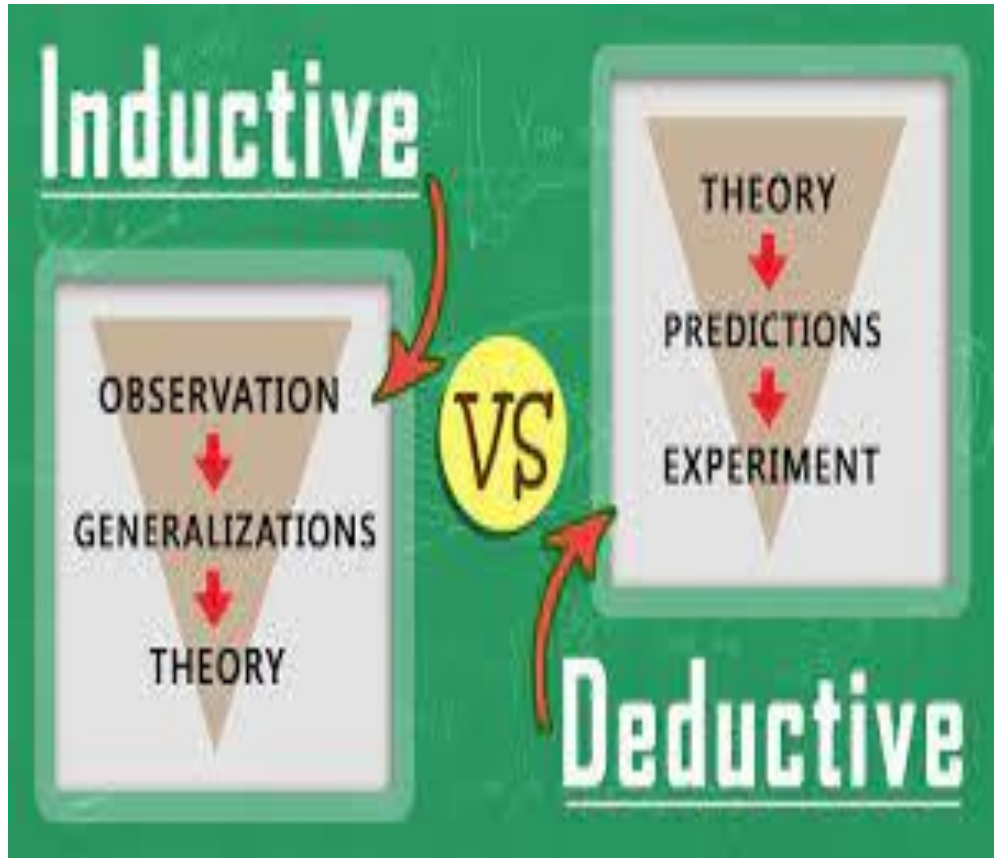


What is Decolonising the Curriculum

- 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

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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