



Making inclusive student engagement happen: Reflections on experiences from an LU research training module on decolonising higher education

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Abstract

In this paper, we bring together three different perspectives in relation to examining what makes for meaningful student engagement in the context of a Research Training Module on decolonising Higher Education (HE) which is open to all postgraduate researchers across Lancaster University. One perspective is from a postgraduate researcher who registered for the module, another from a graduate teaching assistant who co-taught the module, and a third from a lecturer who co-designed the module. Decolonising HE aims in part to dismantle and transform traditional power-hierarchies associated with conventional approaches to teaching and learning practices. One way of doing this is by creating opportunities for students from different backgrounds to both co-design and co-produce teaching and learning content. We each share our perspectives on ways in which we aimed to do this, how this was received by students who participated in the module and what we have learnt on the journey so far.



Introduction

“Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students” (Freire 2005 [1970]: 72). Paulo Freire, the philosopher and educator from Brazil was one of the earliest exponents to talk about rethinking our approach to classroom spaces in the context of colonial and postcolonial hierarchies. In a sense, Freire inaugurated a movement towards transforming classroom engagement by challenging existing traditional hierarchical teaching dynamics known broadly as banking education and moving towards a framework for emancipatory education which aimed to move beyond the teacher-student dichotomy (Mejía, 2020).

To him, meaningful engagement would be possible when pedagogy is centred around emancipation and consciousness development for and with the students. This was particularly relevant to the everyday context in which he was working, when colonial political and economic structures were still the norm and postcolonial society remained socially stratified.

One way to question and address these power dynamics, and colonial and racial legacies in the Higher Education (HE) context in the United Kingdom (UK), involves examining how students can feel more welcomed and included in classroom and campus spaces. A small but significant proportion of these students are international students and/or from minority ethnic groups (HESA 2024, Office for Students 2023). Often the international students are from countries that were at one time British or European colonies. Their progression, attainment and everyday student experiences in the UK can often continue to be influenced and shaped by colonial legacies associated with outmoded and exclusionary teaching and learning practices. For example, recent research on closing the race or ethnicity awarding gap in UK has highlighted how focusing on *inclusive* assessment practices can be one way to address traditional racial barriers and inequities (Campbell 2024). Nevertheless, changing assessment practices alone cannot improve student engagement, attainment and inclusion for all students. We need a plethora of initiatives that can be deployed to combat and dismantle structural and colonial hierarchies in teaching and learning practices. This also needs to involve strategies and activities that centre student agency and involvement in bringing about meaningful change – defined here as change that aims to improve their student experience and sense of inclusion in relation to these practices.

This paper focuses on insights from our teaching and learning experiences associated with a research training module offered to Postgraduate Researchers (PGRs) in Lancaster University



(LU). We too, in small ways, have attempted to transform classroom dynamics and make student engagement more meaningful for all students. We do this by sharing three different but inter-connected perspectives – one of the lecturer/module co-convenor, one of the PGR student colleague who was a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) co-teaching the module, and one from a PGR student colleague who enrolled on the module.

Background Context

Titled 'Decolonising Higher Education,' the module was set up in 2021-22 by the two convenors of the Decolonising Lancaster University (DLU) network. It was devised in response to feedback and suggestions from LU students and staff about ways in which we could enable PGRs to have a more critical understanding of knowledge creation in their doctoral journeys. Although, there were some existing undergraduate and postgraduate modules that related to legacies of colonialism and empire, there was no dedicated module on decolonisation at the PGR level. In addition, the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, where we were located, had also recently committed to decolonisation as a signature project – one of four areas that would define and drive the faculty's strategies going forward. Post George Floyd's murder and associated Black Lives Matter protests, the faculty PGR research training programme convenor was also receptive and responsive to sector-wide calls for decolonising research methodologies, processes and pedagogies, going beyond the tokenistic changes to references and reading lists. This confluence of support provided us with an opportunity to make a strategic intervention with the aim of not just teaching about decolonisation and critical thinking but also decolonising associated teaching and learning practices.

The emphasis on critical thinking and pedagogies (Galamba and Gandolfi 2023, Kincheloe 2005) is linked to the content of the module which focuses on understanding how and why decolonisation is relevant to both Higher Education (HE) and doctoral studies. Decolonisation has been defined and understood in a multitude of ways, and like other academic terms, has faced a variety of critiques (Jansen 2023, Tuck and Yang 2012). In the context of HE, decolonising aims in part to dismantle traditional power-hierarchies in teaching, learning and research spaces and replace with a more egalitarian approach that values and includes student voice (especially those from traditionally marginalised backgrounds/Global South) and diverse content/curriculum (hooks 1994). Following Bhabra et al (2018: 2), we have chosen to interpret decolonisation in HE as an attempt to examine and understand how colonialism, empire and racism has shaped our education system including the curriculum, and how this contributes to contemporary racial and systemic inequalities.



One of the ways to facilitate this understanding is through examining how our teaching and learning practices can often unintentionally create barriers that prevent students from feeling included in a variety of ways. Another related approach is to examine how teaching staff can support opportunities for learning that are not a traditional one-way transmission of information from the academic to the student but involve opportunities to simultaneously learn from and draw on student experiences. Student perspectives are known to enhance content by bringing in new/differing ideas and critiquing established modes of thinking (Brooman, Darwent and Pimor 2014). Our own previous teaching experiences had also underlined the importance of including student voice in order to be more relevant and inclusive. However, we felt that rather than inviting PGRs to be one-off guest lecturers, we would involve them from the very beginning in co-planning and co-producing content and assess how this would impact teaching and learning practices.

Keeping these factors in mind, the convenors devised a ten-week module based around a weekly two-hour workshop with opportunities for PGR students to co-teach and co-design the content and format of the module. This paper shares our learning since 2021 with a particular focus on our experiences from 2023-24. We each share our perspectives on the strategies and practices that were adopted and how this was received by PGR colleagues and staff. The final section of our paper looks at associated challenges and ways forward.

Perspective of Lecturer/Module Convenor (Dr Sunita Abraham)

My colleague and I as co-convenors of the module adopted a multi-pronged strategy to engender greater student engagement and inclusion within the classroom, as well as facilitate a two-way exchange of information. Listed below are the variety of ways that we adopted to support our plans. Many of these ideas were developed in consultation with the four PGR convenors that we have worked with each academic year, as well as through discussions and feedback from students who were enrolled on the module over the years:

1. Use a workshop format for delivery rather than traditional lecture and seminar format.
2. Provide PGRs with opportunities for co-teaching, and co-designing module content and delivery format.
3. Invite students to contribute to broadening and contextualising lecture content especially in relation to inputs from the Global South.



4. Promote greater student engagement with lecture content by using a variety of teaching resources – images, film/media clips, documentary clips, maps, posters, advertisements, music, painting, cartoons and artwork – to support diverse paths to learning.
5. Improve in-class participation by inviting students to share experiences and opinions through various formats - discussion, debate, small group work, games, role play, poster, zine making and presentations.
6. Provide mentoring support for PGRs who are recruited to co-teach. This is useful for all PGRs but especially helpful for those who come from international settings and are not familiar with United Kingdom HE teaching and learning practices.

These different actions and activities have provided the module convenors with opportunities to gain new knowledge, skills and perspectives from PGRs, while also challenging, modifying and reconfiguring their existing views and understanding. For example, one of our PGR colleagues who was enrolled on the module, wanted us to view a documentary as part of our collective learning. The screening provided a detailed and often harrowing account of a forgotten colonial atrocity. It unpacked how during colonial rule, indigenous people in various part of central Africa were subjected to horrific violence, and how this continues to have lasting legacies in contemporary society.

Before and after the screening, we talked about how there were differing viewpoints on depictions of violence relating to colonial exploitation. Although, we as educators often hear arguments against such screenings, it was very refreshing to learn how and why students themselves felt that it was important to see such documentaries. They highlighted that the context and the way in which the story was unveiled and filmed provided a timely reminder that we can often forget that imperial expansion was predicated on violence and terror, and that contemporary variants of neo-colonial control continue to similarly limit development opportunities for many citizens in the Global South.

Perspective of Graduate Teaching Assistant – PGR who is co-teaching (Felipe Sánchez)

From the perspective of a GTA who has co-taught the module over the last three academic years, several actions have been taken to make the module inclusive for students and make student engagement more meaningful. As a starting point, the recruitment process was set up in a way that encouraged applications from international and minority ethnic group students. This was done with the aim of diversifying staff and also encouraging students



from under-represented backgrounds to consider taking on leadership roles and gain teaching experience. However, rather than implicitly making decolonising a project of the minorities, recruitment was framed as an effort to bring multiculturalism to the fore, so that the work of decolonisation was not being unintentionally left to ethnic minorities alone. So, not all GTAs came from a minority ethnic background. While designing the content of the curriculum, the cross-pollination of GTA perspectives from the Global North and Global Majority opened spaces for debate and discussion. This enabled students to engage with diverse opinions and insights.

Furthermore, the interview process was positioned as a learning opportunity for us to highlight our potential contributions to the module, and in doing so gain interview experience and build employment-related skills.

The module had four PGRs as collaborators (GTAs) with sessions alternating between convenors and GTAs, so all GTAs had a chance to anchor their work to the lecturer from the previous week. With that as a guiding structure, the convenors allocated time to support us by providing feedback on slides, observing our teaching, offering additional insights and suggestions on how to structure and deliver the session. This format allowed for continuity and cohesion in content delivery while enabling GTAs to develop their pedagogical skills and share their unique perspectives. In this module, we were not guests but part of a team.

Decolonisation was understood as going beyond merely recognising and valuing diverse and less Eurocentric perspectives, but also including pedagogical decisions and ways of relating to the lecturers, GTAs and the participants. The module convenors helped us to focus on a horizontal/flatter approach to traditional hierarchical power relationships in classroom spaces while also thinking about us as integral contributors to shaping the module's content and delivery in the planning sessions. As an example, I offered feedback to the lecturers on what to shorten in relation to content and where to pause for longer and/or go more in-depth, which was taken into consideration later. Likewise, I have received feedback from my peers regarding speed and content of my own teaching, which I have taken into consideration for later sessions.

Another key feature that promoted both inclusion and engagement related to the format of the sessions. They were structured as discussions rather than traditional lectures and seminars. Instead of the focus being on one individual sharing their knowledge, the lecturer or GTA's role here was more of one facilitating dialogue and discussion through various prompts and activities. In each session, we provided focus with respect to examining a particular aspect of decolonising HE, but the structure in terms of activities and content was



varied and flexible. This allowed for people from different cultures and backgrounds to feel more relaxed in the classroom space while also providing opportunities for them to gain confidence to comment, critique, debate and reflect. These relatively open and collaborative spaces enabled GTAs to share examples and insights from the Global South, and offer and receive feedback to and from peers, fellow GTAs and the lecturers; thus, providing multiple opportunities to flatten hierarchies.

In many ways, these two-way exchanges contributed to the continuous improvement of GTA teaching as well as enhancing the lecturers' content and were simple actions that fostered inclusivity as they established a safe and creative space for co-designing content as part of a team.

Perspective of PGR student who enrolled on the module (Evgenia Apostolou)

From the perspective of a doctoral student (PGR) who comes from a different (non-British) cultural background it was the format and range of resources and activities that helped to make the module both inclusive, and meaningful (especially in relation to my own research).

To begin with, the workshop format created less hierarchical spaces by giving opportunities to discuss, debate, and learn from each other. For instance, every week we were part of small-group discussions where we were encouraged to share our thoughts freely - there wasn't a right or wrong thought or answer. If not an image or media clip, we were introduced to maps, advertisements and music to enable us to think critically and engage with different teaching resources. We did role-play, made posters and played games which helped to break cultural and racial barriers and improved our communication and evaluative skills.

I remember that in one of the sessions which was led by a GTA we were asked to contribute towards a zine on the topic of 'Decolonizing (My) Research.' This involved working with pictures from old magazines and using our imagination and creativity. Students selected pictures that reflected how they would reduce Eurocentric bias in their own research while also thinking of ways in which they could incorporate examples, methodologies and ideas from the Global Majority. I had never done something like this before and it has made me think differently about how to approach teaching and learning, and what activities can enable students to feel more engaged and included.

On reflection, these and other initiatives created a sense of equality between us students attending the module and the GTA and lecturers, as we were all encouraged to develop our



ideas freely without any criticism. For example, the GTA who led the zine-making workshop first demonstrated their idea so that we all understood what the task was in our small groups. On completion, we shared and discussed our zine with other groups in the classroom. As a result, no one remained a bystander, and this fostered a sense of collaboration and understanding between student attendees and the teacher, and amongst us students. This was especially important for people like me who come from a different culture and country. This has helped me to have a positive student experience in what can at first appear to be a challenging and unfamiliar learning space. It has also helped me to think critically about my own understanding in relation to traditional and colonial pedagogical practices which often centre the focus on transmission of information from the front of the class to all assembled and draw primarily on examples and content from the Global North.

Furthermore, this module helped me to realise the necessity of decolonising my own research. For instance, one of the sessions titled 'My research doesn't need decolonising... right?' provided me with critical insights into the debates (Connell Raewyn, 2014) that are associated with this topic. It did this by highlighting different elements of the doctoral journey through a range of inclusive activities. This helped me to consider what it means to reflect on decolonisation as an important process and constituent part of research (Denscombe, M. 2024) and how my research methodology should be structured. So, I have now re-structured my research methodology to consider who is going to benefit from my research and how my positionality affects my approach and actions in relation to the research process.

In addition, the workshop format combined with PGR and lecturer teaching content which drew heavily from the Global South helped provide a diverse set of perspectives. This gave us a chance to engage with different points of view while also building our knowledge and skills in relation to decentring Eurocentric content, ideas, theories and methodologies within our own doctorate.

Challenges and Way Forward

Although the outcomes as seen in student engagement and feedback were very positive, we as lecturer, GTA and attendee recognise that this approach is resource intensive, particularly in relation to time and finances - to recruit, to prepare and to support. Building trust to discuss contested topics and express differing points of view also takes time. Students themselves have multiple calls on their time and this is particularly the case for those from low income or international backgrounds who often have to seek employment to finance their studies and stay. So, they are not always able to enrol for the module, or even if they do



so, they are unable to attend sessions regularly, and this can impact both the classroom dynamics and the opportunities for them to build friendships with peers, as well as interrupting the process of gaining knowledge and understanding on the different topics and themes covered in the module.

From the official and oral feedback, we know that the module has had a positive impact in terms of enhancing student experience and inclusion for all who attended, particularly the PGR students from different countries and ethnicities. HE institutions need to consider whether investing increasingly scarce resources in supporting such collaborative modes of teaching and engagement that centre student input can help to make classroom spaces less hierarchical and alienating, and more welcoming and inclusive for students, particularly for those who come from different cultural backgrounds and nationalities.

Our own experience has been that the combination of one of our module convenors having had to step down from their role and suggestions provided via student feedback have meant that we have decided to reduce the number of weekly sessions from ten to six so that it is not a large time commitment for PGRs who are trying to juggle multiple responsibilities and roles. This also helps to address resource constraints. In addition, we have continued with the important role of centring and supporting GTAs but with a reduced number of GTAs to reflect the smaller number of sessions.

Furthermore, in terms of pedagogical practice, it is not always possible to engage with the diverse needs of students from different disciplines and international settings or to get the balance right between structured and open-ended discussion spaces. However, offering students and staff the opportunities to participate in these two-way exchanges through a carefully co-curated range of workshop formats and activities has helped us to draw closer to the idea that we can all be both simultaneously teachers and students.

In terms of university structures, systems and processes, democratising access to higher education, especially for those from marginalised backgrounds through scholarships/bursaries can enable students to better focus and engage with their academic programmes of study, have a better student experience and feel less pressured in relation to time and monetary concerns. This can help with mental-health related issues as well as open educational opportunities for those with widening-participation related characteristics. Universities are often perceived to be large structures of authoritative oversight, standardisation and sanctions. Improving meaningful student engagement in individual modules needs to be complemented by systemic change. This would involve decolonising existing structures, processes and practices that privilege an often Eurocentric mode of



teaching and learning as the dominant paradigm. We acknowledge that these changes cannot happen overnight and that it requires an investment of resources, and demonstration of strong leadership and commitment from senior management.

Despite these challenges, the opportunities that these strategies and actions engendered have enabled us to demonstrate that in small ways, we are collectively able to co-learn and co-produce knowledge. We hope that in time the ripple effects will lead to more substantive and inclusive pedagogical changes within LU and HE, and be a vehicle for social, economic and political transformations.

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