



Decolonisation as practice: Reflecting on personal and institutional journeys towards change

Posted on April 3, 2024 by Asanda Ngoasheng

[vc_row][vc_column][vc_column_text]I am a South African academic and diversity expert whose transdisciplinary work has shown the power of decoloniality as practice.

In my journey leading institutional journeys of change in academia via curriculum transformation, I have realised that for institutional change to happen, there have to be personal journeys of change for the people in leadership positions. Additionally, student engagement and feedback play a critical role in ensuring that curriculum interventions are truly a joint partnership between academics developing curricula and students deepening knowledge in the studied subject.

The painful and racially divisive history of South Africa has an impact on how knowledge acquisition takes place across the educational system. Apartheid constructed separate 'apart' communities. We now have to

figure out ways to come together and build a common South African identity and community, all the while operating within a grid of apart-ness and separation. The nature of the apartheid grid makes it still possible for white kids to be raised and grow up on one side of town and never interact with those who live just a few kilometres outside of their neighbourhoods.

In a recent reading group for *Reading Decoloniality*, I provided a personal, autoethnographic narrative where I told the story of my participation in social, academic and activist life. This life is across the #Rhodesmustfall and #Feesmustfall movement, interdisciplinary consultancies as a diversity specialist, journalistic and educational pursuits towards curriculum development, and the impact of these experiences on my thinking about decolonial research, teaching and learning.

In reflecting on my work that explores decoloniality as practice in curriculum development in dialogue with reading group guests, I particularly honed in on the patience and understanding required for curriculum transformation, noting that curriculum change does not happen in a vacuum; and decolonial pedagogies, while political, can go beyond mere 'political' statements and become true practice and methodology. I will discuss these ideas further as key tenets for consolidating decolonisation as practice.

Curriculum change does not happen in a vacuum

It is political, difficult and emotionally taxing. Curriculum change is best done in collaboration with different stakeholders from different backgrounds which could be diverse identity groups, disciplines or both.

In my work, I constantly crisscross disciplines and previously demarcated separations between knowledge and people. This sees me come to new understandings of old problems. I develop work and curricula that are transformative and lead to personal and institutional change towards more diverse curricula and spaces. I focus on the importance of the process of re-humanising each other, through dialogue. I apply my methodology for rehumanising dialogue in academic, non-profit and corporate worlds.

Decolonial pedagogies can go beyond the 'political'

They can become true practice and methodology. Decolonial pedagogies can lead to a positive impact on one's ways of working and ways of engaging with racialised, othered, marginalised or minoritized people.

For decolonisation to be practical, one must understand the importance of context. One cannot decolonise the curriculum in a context where freedom of expression and creative expression are absent. Even if the bigger context or institution is stifling, practitioners of decolonial pedagogies can find safe spaces where freedom and creativity in curriculum development are allowed.

At the personal level, there is a fair amount of emotional labour and transformation required in academics building curricula with decolonial pedagogy. Academics learn, unlearn and challenge their own and each other's inherent visible and invisible biases. This process of change takes time and is best done in collaboration with colleagues in the same or different departments. Even with full support from colleagues, it may take years to move from ideation to implementing ideas in the curriculum. Institutional change is difficult and time-consuming so it's important to find collaborators who are there for the long haul.

To begin decolonisation as practice, one has to constantly remind themselves of their *raison d'être* by asking some questions like:

- Education for what?
- Education for whom?
- What do we mean when we talk about 'decolonising'?
- What do we want to undo - what change do we want to see?

[/vc_column_text][vc_toggle title="Reading group event details" open="true"]**Date:** 21st February 2024

Title: Decolonisation as practice: Reflecting on personal and institutional journeys towards change with Asanda Ngoasheng

Speaker: [Asanda Ngoasheng](#)

Chair: [Maria Jose Recalde-Vela](#)

Minutes by: [Berenike Jung](#)[/vc_toggle][vc_toggle title="Selected minutes"]**Asanda:**

Decolonial conversations only make sense when they are global conversations. The system of colonialism was a global system of domination and therefore we need a global plan to remove it. Much of my work is about community, also outside of the academic space. I am a diversity trainer, and consultant for various organisations especially around gender injustices, and a political analyst in SA. These three roles are interlinked: we need to understand the political system, and the party system as a colonial structure; gender-based violence has an economic impact.

Some events that shaped me: I am one of the first generation of 'Nelson Mandela kids' who went to formerly white schools, integrated schools in SA and that had an impact on my understanding of decoloniality. When I was 14, I attended one of the first TRC (Truth and Reconciliation Commission) in South Africa, and that too had a deep impact on me, showing me the impact of storytelling. These events allowed people to build intergenerational narratives of pain. I was part of the Fees Must Fall and Rhodes Must Fall movements in South Africa.

We know that curricula and education have a political dimension, but we don't inquire in enough depth: education towards what, and for whom? What do we talk about when we say 'decolonising'? What do we want to undo?

I moved from building curricula towards an interdisciplinary conversation. Institutionally there was not much appetite for this, but many academics were very interested in this topic. The reading is one example of cooperation with the architecture department to create an intervention with students that included a bus tour to various parts of Cape Town to look at the buildings built for different communities. The apartheid legacy entails spatial planning of infrastructure that divided and still divides communities. Many of the students had never been to or explored housing structures in communities other than their own.

We identified two communities to start with, Langa and Pinelands, both using the same architectural methodology. Both were based on the Garden City model: this comprises a central square and the town being built and developed around it. And

yet the structures built for white people and built for black people were very different, e.g. the size of the houses or the space between them. This allowed students to see the impact of politics and history on built structures, and how the ideology and mentality of apartheid are replicated and maintained even today – in assumptions around who deserves what kind of home and what kind of space, e.g. the idea that black, working class or poor people are considered as deserving only of a smaller structure, not deserving or needing a park, a yard for the children to play in when social housing is built in the Western Cape etc. This project gets students to reflect on their role in replicating or deconstructing the apartheid structural grid. How cities and countries are built is very much a political and economic project, in which the system of inequality can replicate itself. It is a lie that infrastructure is not political.

It took years to go from ideation to implementing these ideas in the curriculum. Institutional change is very difficult and takes a long time. It is important to find people who are there for the long haul.

Decolonisation of the curriculum is not easy. It is political; it is based on history, and history is often contested. It matters to get everyone on the same page and into a supportive structure. Colonisation harms everyone – it harms oppressed people and it harms white people as it expects them to disinvest in their own humanity, in order to dehumanise those around them.

Reader:

Building critical skills of those at technical universities, that should be part of the skill set that is learnt. Could you elaborate on the 'white privilege walk'?

Asanda:

The 'white privilege walk' is aimed at helping people perceive

inequality. It asks a number of questions for example – around how a person grows up and is socialised and the amount of resources available to them. Some of these questions are to demonstrate various forms of privilege for example whether the language used at school is the same as the one used at home, how many books were in a person's home etc...

The white privilege walk is a process that requires 'deep work', in the example in the text, a white student was allowed to opt out but it should not be something that people can opt out for feeling discomfort. There was a lot of learning for those students who were privileged but the exercise can also be triggering for those who have experiences of inequality and oppression. They can be harmed and feel even more stuck in the grid or system. I don't recommend using it all the time however, it can be a useful and powerful exercise for specific circumstances. In realising that white people were learning at the expense of the oppressed and marginalised in the white privilege walk. We added an extra exercise to the privilege walk to disrupt the grid. We asked students to imagine an alternative grid/world where the things that marginalised and oppressed people have were valued, for example speaking more than one language and we asked them to build these questions which changed things and the final outcome such that students left feeling empowered.

Reader:

In the UK, there is often not enough space given to decoloniality and the role of the British Empire. What is the role of educators in enabling that? What about our colleagues who are not supportive?

Asanda:

The institutions are often not necessarily in support of this work, but individuals who support each other can push them. Don't

waste your time getting colleagues on board who are unwilling – instead, focus on the future colleagues you are building, empowering your students so they can become critical thinkers. Eventually, that will force your colleagues to step up also: if you change your curriculum, students will notice and will also push for change in other spaces.

It is important to deconstruct for students the psychological feeling of being ‘less than’ if they are not in the Ivy League. What the so-called Ivy Leagues do really well is to give students confidence, and that is what we should strive to give all our students.

Reader:

Asanda, can you advise on this question: in suggesting some decolonial alternatives to a colleague working on memory, he said he wouldn't use any indigenous methodology because of cultural appropriation. I felt very frustrated because his research aligned very well with some non-Western worldviews, so it's difficult to get the message about decolonisation across when one finds this kind of resistance.

Asanda:

This is the recurring problem of considering the knowledge of the other is not knowledge, but something specific, marked. There is a difference between cultural appropriation and cultural appreciation. In Western culture, scholarship is a show and tell; whereas in indigenous, non-western thinking, art is in the everyday, practical, it is not an inaccessible monument or a glass cage in a gallery.

Scholarship on memory cannot only come from a Westernised frame. Our collective memory, storytelling, and engagement with the past are so different depending on a group's experience – South Africa offers a blatant example of this different

experience and memory of the past as black people and white people of South Africa remember the past differently.

Reader:

White educators are often afraid to get it wrong, to make mistakes. Can you talk more about how to adapt these modules and approaches to different student bodies and their needs?

Asanda:

In writing academic articles, we often create the impression that we know what we are doing. That's why it has always been important for me in my academic article writing to write about the challenges, mistakes, and the journey that this process takes. Part of the challenge is to be admonished, to learn and to develop the humility to come back from a challenge, and to accept that you are not the expert always. Academics often miss the opportunity to learn from students. Students create the space and learning they need. Decolonisation is a big word, and we often want to deconstruct everything at the same time. Sometimes the changes can be quite small but have a powerful impact on the students. You can take small steps. Keep going back to the idea of 'education for who?'

Reader:

How can we deal with the problem of linguistic barriers, and issues of access to non-western scholarship?

Asanda:

You need a framing but don't be too attached to your lecture

notes or presentations and your expertise. Get the students to look for decolonial approaches, for literature from under-represented groups. This way you expand your own world view as well.

White people are part of diversity. They should just not be centred, but white people can be included as one identity among many, marked instead of invisible.

It's important to build community. Talk to as many people as possible. This opens your thinking, and allows you access to different resources.

You can teach young people that there are sources of information outside of academic spaces: you can take them to a fringe theatre production, or do the knowledge tree exercise (what did you learn from your grandparents? Who are you, where are you from?) You can start by decolonising your reading list. Acknowledge who you are, and acknowledge your weaknesses. Invite non-Western speakers and push for non-Western colleagues in your department, there are many ways to decolonise a curriculum.

Asanda finishes:

You know nothing and everything. If you can acknowledge to yourself that you know nothing, you approach new learning with humility. If you can acknowledge to yourself that you know everything, you will have the confidence to navigate uncertainty. It's a very bruising and uncertain process. It can be painful and brutal work. You may be silenced, harassed, denied promotions etc. Acknowledge it, process it, and accept it as reality. Build a community to support you through your struggles.

Remember why you are doing this: because we deserve better. We deserve a better future, a more humane future. We deserve to be humanised. We are so disconnected from each other, and we lack that connection. The South African word Ubuntu signals that: there is no way of being that is not also connected to another being.

Disinvest in whiteness. It is not in your interest, nor in your

community's interest. When you do this work, you will suffer but you will also be held very gently by your community. Love yourself, accept yourself, this is for you and for future humanity.

[/vc_toggle][vc_toggle title="Final thoughts" open="true"]A good reminder is that colonisation harms everyone - it harms oppressed people and it harms those who are white and privileged because it expects a divestment in humanity. In order to discriminate, one has to dehumanise themselves and others.

This is why a strong lifeline can be forged through finding others who share interests in exploring, learning and unlearning. Colleagues who are critical thinkers and accountability partners can also help you to build students as critical thinkers. They can support you in challenging a system that harms everyone, even though the harm and emotional labour occur at different levels.

Decolonising the curriculum doesn't have to be yet another big thing to embark on or be scared of. Sometimes the changes can be quite small but have a powerful impact on individuals. To build confident and critical students, one needs to deconstruct the feeling of being 'less than' that plagues most marginalised, othered and minoritized people. Once this is done, you will meet less resistance and challenge from students.

For decoloniality as practice, one must build community by talking to as many people as possible which opens up your thinking and allows you to access different resources.

You must be able to hold conflicting thoughts and principles at different times as you process change. If you can acknowledge to yourself that *you know nothing* then new learning can be approached with humility. If you can acknowledge to yourself that *you know everything*, you will have the confidence to navigate uncertainty.[/vc_toggle][vc_column][vc_row][vc_row][vc_column][vc_separator align="align_left" el_width="50" css_animation="fadeIn" css=""]

Editor: CLAIRE FRENCH

[/vc_column][[/vc_row]