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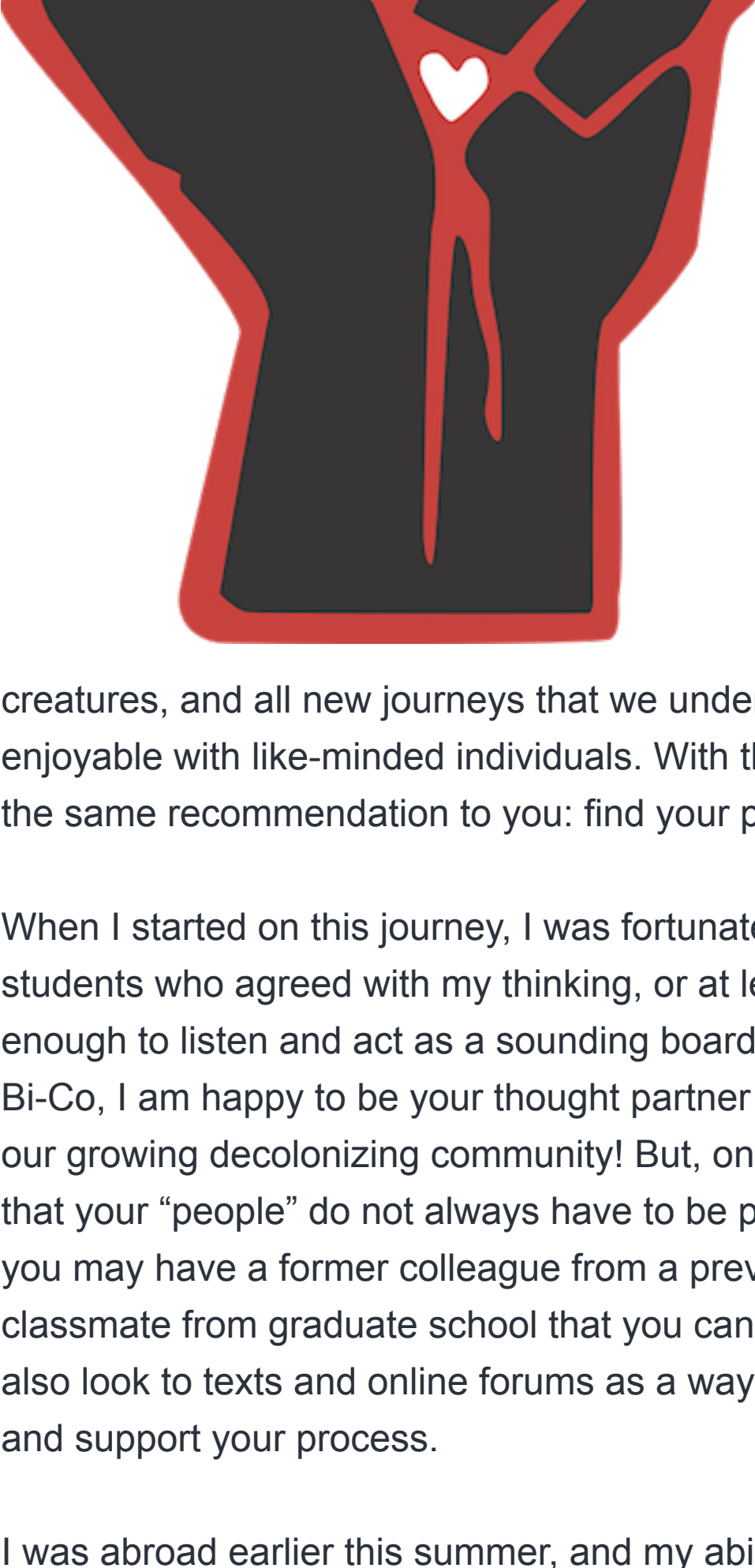
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Revolutionizing my Syllabus: The Process

Professor Chanelle Wilson shares her own syllabus revision and decolonization processENTRY 3: FINDING
YOUR PEOPLE

Many have heard the phrase “find your people.” This is often offered as a suggestion in a new employment, residential, or social environment, where a person will need support and community. Finding your people, for many, is the lifeline to happiness and thriving. As human beings, we are social creatures, and all new journeys that we undertake will be more enjoyable with like-minded individuals. With that in mind, I am making the same recommendation to you: find your people J.

When I started on this journey, I was fortunate to have colleagues and students who agreed with my thinking, or at least were interested enough to listen and act as a sounding board. For professionals in the Bi-Co, I am happy to be your thought partner and embrace you into our growing decolonizing community! But, one thing to keep in mind is that your “people” do not always have to be physically accessible – you may have a former colleague from a previous position, or a classmate from graduate school that you can reach out to. You may also look to texts and online forums as a way to develop community and support your process.

I was abroad earlier this summer, and my ability to connect beyond my immediate community was limited, so I found myself in an internet café doing research for decolonizing my syllabi. I came across an institution of higher education on their journey, and I think you will find their work superbly helpful! I did, and this served as an example of me extending my community in an unlikely place. I reached out to some of the collaborators, and we are at the beginning of making this collegial experience the real deal. You’ll find a link to their work here: <https://www.keele.ac.uk/equalitydiversity/equalityawards/raceequalitychance/>...

I will be referencing the “Keele Manifesto for Decolonising the Curriculum.”

The 11 principles that are offered to conceptualize what it means to decolonize curriculum are profound. For the sake of keeping this entry fairly brief, as we all peddle away at prepping for the semester beginning. I have chosen to highlight five that resonate with me and my syllabi work. I hope you will take time to do the same for yourself and for your decolonization processing.

#1- Decolonising the curriculum means, first of all, acknowledging that knowledge is not owned by anyone. It is a cumulative and shared resource that is available to all. Knowledge (and culture) is collectively produced and human beings of all races, ethnicities, classes, genders, sexual orientations, and disabilities have as much right as elite white men to understand what our roles and contributions have been in shaping intellectual achievements and shifting culture and progress.

What this means for me: I have shifted all of my course-based learning activities and processes to those more closely aligned with constructivism: recognizing that knowledge is co-created, considers context, welcomes prior experiences, and should be a shared practice between all people in the learning community: student to student, student to curriculum, student to professor, etc.

#2 - Decolonising the curriculum is to recognise that knowledge is inevitably marked by power relations. Our universities exist in a global economy of knowledge, with a definite hegemonic centre, reflecting hierarchies of race, class and gender. At the top of this hierarchy sit the knowledge

institutions of the global North, databanks and research centres supported by the wealth of European and North American powers. This hegemonic position is not just a matter of the wealth of the global North. Our world is still shaped by a long colonial history in which white upper class men are at the top of social hierarchy, most disciplines give disproportionate significance to the experiences, histories and achievements of this one group.

What this means for me: Many of our students have been socialized into the dynamic of hierarchies in classrooms, with instructional leaders at the top, followed by students who perform intellectual capacity visibly, students who embrace and share their voice audibly, students who perform whiteness well, students who practice conformity and follow directions, and so on, and so forth. I have to recognize my own power in instructional spaces and plan to mitigate this. In many ways, it is difficult to go against what I was taught, and what my students have perfected as playing school, but the other side of this adversity is beautiful. In what ways do you hold on to power and wield it in your classroom? I am not advocating for a complete breakdown in process (please note I purposefully did not use the word “order”), but how can you work with your students to create structure and procedures together? In many ways, we all know what makes classrooms work well, and become inviting and engaging spaces, how can you lean on the other knowers in the room to support you? How can you lay the groundwork for building community, rather than competition?

#3 - Decolonising is about rethinking, reframing and reconstructing the current curriculum in order to make it better, and more inclusive. It is about expanding our notions of good literature so it doesn’t always elevate one voice, one experience, and one way of being in the world. It is about considering how different frameworks, traditions and knowledge projects can inform each other, how multiple voices can be heard, and how new perspectives emerge from mutual learning.

What this means for me: “Oh, my favorite!” Since I was a young undergraduate writing my graduate school personal statements, the theme of rethinking, reimagining, reconceptualizing, and now revolutionizing education has always been present. For my curriculum, this means sharing information with students in a way that does not prioritize the regurgitation of my ideas, but encourages deep reflection on the part of the student. I want to know what they think. I want to know their struggles with material. I welcome challenging course texts, and even when they challenge my thinking (though I will not pretend this last one is easy). However, the standard is that students need to feel welcomed in my classroom, and free to express themselves. This is a baseline, but it is not always easy for students to participate in my classrooms. Many suffer from years of being stifled, they worry what other students will think of them, they also worry about saying the wrong thing, or Athena forbid, sounding like they are uninformed and ignorant. It will take scaffolding to coach students to participating in an inclusive classroom, but it starts with you as the instructional leader.

#5 - Decolonising means identifying ways in which the university structurally reproduces colonial hierarchies; confronting, challenging and rejecting the status quo; and reimagining them and putting alternatives into practice for the benefit of our academic integrity and our social viability.

What this means for me: Grades – grades – grades! Though I was a person intrinsically and extrinsically motivated by grades, this is one of the deepest rooted colonizing structures in education. I reject it in so many ways, but I recognize that I am still, at the moment, required to operate in this system. One way that I have been inspired to reimagine this practice is having students engage in

some form of self-assessment, whether this is students submitting learning reflections with their work, or with students assigning a grade to their work, alongside a reflection of their learning. Each of these practices invite students into the process of assessing their learning, alongside my perspective on their demonstration of learning. This provides room for academic integrity, dialogue around their learning process, and rejects the notion that as the instructor, I hold complete authority over the documentation of their learning, aka their grade.

#8 - Decolonising requires sustained collaboration, discussion and experimentation among groups of teachers and students, who themselves have power to make things happen on the ground and think about what might be done differently. The change will take different forms in different universities and disciplines. There is no one-size-fits-all solution.

What this means for me: I know that what works for one class, one group of students, and one academic level will not work for all of me courses. Though I do have my go-to activities and assignments, I am constantly looking for ways to switch it up. This is time-consuming, but it really keeps my teaching experiences from becoming mundane. Regarding the development of my syllabi, I make sure to include some language that “it is subject to change” because I need that freedom and flexibility to be reflexive and respond to the needs of the course, the material, etc. I am also in communication with my students throughout the semester to understand their experience. Each course has an anonymous mid-semester evaluation, usually administered right before the semester break, and I share the results with students and we discuss ways to move forward, appropriately. Experimentation is also key – don’t be afraid to, in good faith, try something new. This must also be paired with informed preparation and critical reflection, either individually or collectively, to truly assess intentions and outcomes.

The other information shared on the link above can be profoundly informative as you continue on your way. Hopefully, now that you are deep in thinking, you feel comfortable moving forward in your doing. Take a crack at putting these ideas into practice in your syllabi and as you make decisions about its design, course practices, instructional materials, and learning activities, consider the ways that you can rethink, reimagine, and revolutionize how students are exposed and invited to engage with your discipline’s content.

Entry 2: Doing the Real Work

As I continue on this journey, I become more invested in the possibilities of progress and change as the days goes by. I started doing deep investigative work on my syllabi, and then I realized that there was a prior starting place - understanding colonization and the real issue. Bear with me, and promise that you’ll keep reading... Whiteness is the real issue - please note I did not write white people - I specifically chose the word “whiteness.” Whiteness is an artificial set of principles and practices that makes possible the oppression of others, typically darker skinned people, but white people included. People who inhabit these principles and practices are performing whiteness and upholding the system of white supremacy. All people can be complicit in this, white people and people of color. Now I have been doing this work for some time - really working to understand whiteness and it’s implications. I’ve included some texts below to support you on your way.

[Understanding Whiteness](#)[The Invisible Whiteness of Being](#)[A Sociologist Examines the “White Fragility” That Prevents White Americans from Confronting Racism](#)[Whiteness Project](#)[We Settlers Face a Choice: Decolonization or White Supremacy](#)

If you have reviewed some of the materials and are feeling a deep sense of resonance - great! If you have reviewed these materials and are feeling some dissonance, or conflict - great! In order to do the real work of decolonizing, we must all come to terms with the ways that whiteness has been created and pervaded the world, especially in education. If you are not ready to tackle this issue, then you may need to rethink your commitment to decolonizing. Why you ask? Colonization is fueled by the institution of whiteness and white supremacy. In order to truly dismantle it, a person must intimately understand all of its ways of influence. James Baldwin wrote, “The price one pays for pursuing any profession, or calling, is an intimate knowledge of its ugly side.” So, a base level of understanding is that whiteness, institutionalized in formal schooling, is the problem. After doing some preliminary work to understand it, then you can be ready to think about what it means to decolonize your syllabus. Look at your course documents for the elements of [whiteness](#) and highlight them. Question their necessity? Consider another way? Is whiteness present there as well? Are there some elements that allow flexibility, authentic engagement, human connection, challenging information, student choice, student creativity?

If you’re still reading - thank you! I used to be afraid to use the word ‘white’ in academic spaces. I used to anticipate [white emotionality](#) and at all costs, I wanted my white counterparts to be comfortable. So, I would sugar coat and gloss over truths, until the main point was so obscure that it didn’t matter what I was trying to say. But, the slick thing about whiteness is that it becomes invisible, it loudly silences, it violently subdues, it quietly strangles everyone involved. It reminds me of Voldemort, the super villain, in J.K. Rowling’s amazing Harry Potter series: referring to him as “He who must not be named” perpetuated fear in those of the Wizarding World. Whiteness is like Voldemort, and until we have the courage to call it what it is and use its name, then we will not be able to confront it. At what point will we shine a light on whiteness and white supremacy in colonization? I started, earnestly, just last year: when will you?

Entry 1: Why decolonize my syllabi?

The idea to begin the process of decolonizing my syllabi originated from two places; 1) I was considering a research project where I wanted to teach a course on decolonizing education and how important it is to recognize the legacy of oppression in colonized places that is still present in traditional educational practices. 2) This idea and desire became more specific when my students embarked on a teaching project with the topic of Fighting Hegemony. It had occurred to me that education needed to be decolonized, but I hadn’t fully considered all the ways that I, too, was perpetuating these practices and patterns. My students taught a lesson that engaged the entire classroom, highlighted the voices of marginalized, and used creative ways for students to access content: through songs, poetry, and visual art. I was inspired to really take up the cause, authentically, when I was tasked with revamping an existing course.

Formerly known as “Multicultural Education,” as a department, we decided that a more authentic representation of what students came away with was deepening their understanding of power structures in the US and around the world in education. Thus, the course was retitled “Reconceptualizing Power in Education.” The goal is to expose students to power structures in society that are reproduced in schools, along with ways that individuals can play a role in disrupting and resisting these. In theory, this course will pair theory with practice and encourage students to recognize and fight hegemony, patriarchy, white supremacy, and teacher-centered practices.

Tied to my own professional goal to rethink, reimagine, and revolutionize education, I am stoked for this opportunity! However, it is still a daunting task. As a former practitioner and an alumnus of a traditionally Eurocentric teacher preparation program, I have been actively trying to reform and unlearn those ways for about 6 years. The years prior to this were filled with fairly superficial reform practices that challenged some elements of colonization, but often reinforced them in ways I wasn’t cognizant of. When my eyes were opened, I vowed never to go back to the educational malpractice that I was participating in, and it’s been an amazing roller coaster ride ever since.

I’m looking forward to sharing this journey with you because I hope it can bring you as much joy as it brings me. So now on to how I’m actually doing this:

Step One: I began to read a multitude of texts about decolonization and post-colonial theory. Exposure to the ways of thinking about education as a tool of harm and control is quite apparent, if a person just takes a bit of time to look for it. Each of us chose our discipline because in some way we were drawn to something about it. We love it, and that may blind us to its negative side. It is our responsibility to develop a well-rounded perspective. I recommend that each of you set aside time to list out the possibilities and challenges that currently exist within your discipline. Try to make both sides equal: what could students love about it? What might alienate others?

Step Two: I watched YouTube videos and TedTalks that helped give me another perspective on decolonization, but also how students conceptualized syllabi. This practice helped me to rethink the syllabus document and the ways that students are introduced to me, course content, the discipline, and each other. Another recommendation: make a list of the things that you are learning about yourself, your practices, your discipline. How are you complicit in colonization? What are the ways you are fighting it? This list may not be even, but try your best to continue to think and add to it. I created a note in phone, so that I could record things as they came to me.

Some of these sources that I referenced are listed on our [Tools and Resources: Origination](#) page, linked here.

Next, I am going to take a hard look at my syllabi. I’ve printed each of them for the fall, and I plan to go through and annotate all the elements that perpetuate colonizing practices. Hope you’ll come back and continue to engage with me. Feel free to email a comment or question to [me](#)!

