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A Path to Decolonizing the Online Classroom

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A Path to Decolonizing the Online Classroom

Abstract

Designing our online classroom is more than just putting content online or showing up on video conferencing as scheduled. The inequities across regions that inhibit success with online learning may affect students anywhere at any time. How do you navigate what inequities our learners may face? Are decolonization strategies the key to creating a more equitable, student-centered classroom? This paper illustrates the autoethnographic case study research process of decolonizing the online classroom that takes the researcher to the United Kingdom and back to the US and Canada to realize how global decolonization varies, yet how using an equity lens in designing courses can create a student-centered online classroom.

Keywords

Anti-racist Pedagogy, Decolonization, Digital Equity, Education, Inequity, Online Classroom, Social Determinants of Health, UNESCO, United Nations

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A Path to Decolonizing the Online Classroom

In my early experiences as a student in online learning, I signed up for a writing course with the idea of improving my writing skills in different genres and dabble in some writing endeavors. I was already a fan of writing and writing retreats and I had taken some business courses online successfully. The syllabus looked straight forward enough: weekly tasks, short writing assignments and creating a blog. When the course started, I was reading the first online lecture and the instructor noted that the course is designed for your mobile device, and you should access it daily to reply to comments on your blog.

WHAT???

My first experience of digital equity was the realization of my own inequities as an online student. Not only did I *NOT* own a cellphone, but the coverage was sporadic was sporadic at best in my region. As far as daily access to the course, that was feasible from my dial-up internet on the home computer. I even had a 30 hour/ month dialup internet plan! I had increased my 12 hours/month plan to 30 hours while specifically for taking the online writing course. In some regions of the world, little has changed in two decades since my own online writing course experience. In some regions of the world, sporadic cell service and even a bit of access to the internet is still a dream.

What does it even mean to decolonize education or our classroom? “Decolonisation not only refers to the complete removal of the domination of external forces within a geographical space, but it also refers to decolonisation of the mind from the colonisers ideas – ideas that made the colonised seem inferior” (Keele University, 2018, para. 4). In this respect, Keele University has developed a manifesto of decolonization strategies that with the goal of representation of

black and minority ethnic groups into the curriculum to diminish the current colonial legacy presented in white, western intellectual traditions as well as Eurocentric views.

The perspectives of what decolonizing education means varies around the world. “The decolonisation of education means that a nation must become independent with regards to the acquisition of knowledge skills, values, beliefs and habits” (Wingfield, 2017, para. 4). As a result, students believe that the current educational system does not support decolonization. Decolonization requires opportunities for students, educators, and stakeholders to identify and voice the challenges locally, regionally, and globally. Open dialogue where there is talk about race, racism, and systemic change provides valuable information, builds community and a path forward, which is the heart of reconciliation in decolonizing education.

Decolonizing online education prevents more challenges as courses are delivered in a variety of formats to students who may or may not even live in the countries from where we teach from. As educators, we may have less sense of what their lived experiences as students is and need to be more attuned to creating a learning environment that challenges how we would teach in a face-to-face classroom. We can’t just put content online and say this is the course.

In an ethnographic case study, the researcher links theory to practice and connects their own knowledge to develop understanding or meaning while learning about the work environment (Fairhurst & Good, 1991). Sparkes (2000) states that autoethnographic research is “highly personalized accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher for extending sociological understanding” (p. 21). Intertwining autoethnography with ethnographic case study offers the opportunity to use highly personalized research experience of the researcher to link theory and practice and develop a deeper, more meaningful research reflection of the experience. This autoethnographic case study explores development of an equity lens in online

education and inequities in online learning and the challenges of creating the courses that our students need at the post-secondary level as a path to decolonizing the online classroom.

Developing an Equity Lens in Online Education

As educators, we have a role to play across disciplines to not only provide a learning environment where adult learners can thrive, and where they can feel safe, but to also help them learn how to create the same environment for their own future students in Teacher Education programs. We also play a role in ensuring we understand who students are and how we can ensure their success. As a digital pedagogist, my focus for these goals is how to decolonize the online classroom. Geographically, decolonization has different meanings. As revealed later in my article, decolonization as a term for my own research evolves with my research to include anti-racist pedagogy and equity in education. My research demonstrates the importance of navigating the inequities our students face whether they are related to technological inequities or the social determinants of health and to ensure that the voices in the curriculum represent the diversity of the students that enroll in the classes by continuously developing my equity lens.

“Teaching with an equity lens and working to develop myself as a reflective practitioner are core principles in my pedagogical practice” (Smith, 2019, p. x). I was destined to be a digital pedagogist and I was destined to teach with an equity lens. From the days of Commodore 64 of my youth, to helping my elementary teachers learn how to use Apple computers, to browsing the menu of online learning options credited and non credited as a lifelong learning adult, my past experiences as student and instructor ensure that I design courses with a equity lens, with students in mind and being mindful of the inequities that they may endure.

Reich (2019) recognizes that “digital equity is inextricably linked to pedagogical and structural inequality more broadly. The first step toward digital equity is helping educators learn

everything they can about equitable teaching practices in general” (para. 11). In developing my own equity lens, I am taken back to the 90’s and fieldwork in New Zealand immersed in Maori culture where I first found out that the United Nations actually has goals for a better world.

United Nations Sustainable Development Goal for Education

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, originally the Millennium Development Goals, focus on sustainability to end all forms of poverty. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), a specialist association, has the responsibility to respond to challenges in education worldwide. Their responsibility includes Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 of the Education 2030 Agenda, to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” and UNESCO’s role is to create changemakers through “partnerships, policy, guidance, capacity development, monitoring and advocacy” (UNESCO, 2019, para. 3). While my original encounter with Sustainable Development Goals leaned towards environmentalism, my eyes were opened to how everything in our world and everyone is connected. Poverty and housing insecurity, in particular, were two factors that presented themselves in my 90’s research and continue to be present decades later. In relation to education, what resonates with me is that UNESCO strives to “help countries in mobilizing resources and implementing innovative and context-appropriate solutions to provide education remotely, leveraging hi-tech, low-tech and no-tech approaches” (para. 6).

Having technology is certainly a necessity for online learning, but as I travelled to conferences and for research globally, I have learned that technological equity is just one facet of inequities in our online classrooms. As a digital pedagogist who hasn’t taught in person in several years, my perspective of equity is shifting through from a global view to the needs of each student who enrolls in my courses and the inequities in my online classroom include how

we design the curriculum and who authors the resources that we use, which leads to my path of learning through conferences, research travel and advocacy influences.

Conferences, Research Travel and Advocacy Influences

In 2018, the Teaching and Learning Today conference in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada, provided an opportunity for researchers and educators from across Canada come together to support Indigenization and open pedagogy. Ironically, they didn't mean together and the conference was scheduled as two separate themes: 1) Indigenization and 2) Open Pedagogy. As a digital pedagogist, I saw an opportunity to weave the ideas together: indigenizing open academia. Who are the authors of the resources that we use? The single most important takeaway was that in order to decolonize the course, we start with the curriculum and resources. Since 2018, I have expanded my equity lens to encompass including not only black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) voices, but a larger anti-racism lens where voices such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, and two-spirit (LBTQ2s+) need to be included in our curriculum.

In 2019, the Equity in Education Coalition offered a conference on decolonizing education in Seattle, Washington, USA. The purpose was to increase understanding and practices that engage in anti-racism and equity for education to “thoroughly examine the intersection of racism in education and intentionally center the voices, experiences, and expertise of people of colour - Native/Indigenous, Black, and Immigrant/Refugee” (Equity in Education Coalition of Washington, 2021, para. 2). The goals of furthering decolonization in education were to provide networking opportunities, further understanding of anti-racism and equity, and be a catalyst advocating for future change. I questioned how I could foster advocacy and create opportunities of my own students to be catalysts for change.

Subsequently, at a conference in Spokane, Washington, USA, the 2019 Ethnicity, Race and Indigenous Peoples Conference with the theme of “Bridges and Walls Across the Americas” provided for diversity of voices to present research of decolonization across North and South America. My own presentation demonstrated how arts-based research can be used to explore the experiences of all ethnicities to heal the legacies of colonialism. In my research, reconciliation’s definition is finding a way forward from decolonization. I admit my failure in using a Canadian term for a global conference because the conference audience questioned the word reconciliation in relation to a decolonization. Nonetheless, I continued to expand my research, my awareness and strategies of decolonizing my online classroom by further expanding my worldview of decolonization globally and travelled to the United Kingdom in both 2019 and 2020. Throughout the United Kingdom, voices are disseminating the goal of creating anti-racist classrooms.

Shortly after I left the UK due to the pandemic, Decolonise UofK created Voices of (Un)belonging, stories of student groups coming from many universities documenting stories of decolonial and antiracist advocacy and work of students. The University of Kent’s Decolonizing the Curriculum Project states that, “Students are increasingly demanding a ‘liberated curriculum’ that represents their diversity as we see from #liberatemydegree, ‘Why is My Curriculum White?’ and other movements mentioned above as well as Kent Student Union campaign ‘Diversify My Curriculum’” (Decolonise UofK, 2020, para. 1). As a listener of students and lifelong learner myself, the location is different, but the demands are similar globally.

I continuously notice how the education system can shape us to further colonization. It is one thing to be asked to use branded words that a school or university may have created, but to be asked to speak and write in ways that change your voice and your ideas is how colonization continues and is furthered rather than reconciled. In educator conversations, the solutionary

educators are often the ones who receive the discipline letters and discipline conversations because they see where change is needed but are not heard through to be able to offer their solutions. They may sound like negative educators, but we are in a colonized system and my experience is that solutionary educators only voice the problems they see when they have a corresponding solution. They also tend to have a lived experience and ancestry enrooted in being colonized.

Back in North America, implementing my research of decolonizing online learning with online asynchronous, synchronous, hybrid and continuous enrolment classrooms weaves with my own experiences as both student and teacher in shaping my ways of knowing of digital equity through inequity and the many aspects of our lives that can affect teaching and learning, as well as reflecting upon the goals of UNESCO for education worldwide.

Inequities for Online Learning

Previously developing a workshop on decolonizing our online classrooms for educators in K-12 and post-secondary, I had planned to share strategies towards the idea of accommodations in online learning for hi-tech, low-tech and no-tech learning, but in 2020 the workshop evolved with when the talking circle portion allowed space for participants to share their own experiences and realize the inequities that they have noticed. We are in a time when educators need to be heard and know that they are not alone in this equity journey.

Reflecting on my path to creating the workshop, my storying of being an online student without cell service, and with a limited dial up internet plan opens up the opportunity to pose question in developing our equity lens for decolonizing our online classroom.

- What inequities are present?
- What strategies do you know of for decolonizing your online classroom?

- What strategies are you already using?

Inequities go well beyond technology and internet access. Throughout the research of digital equity, the social determinants of health are presented as repeated themes. The National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health (NCCIH) lists the following:

Poverty, employment, working conditions, education and literacy, social status, social support networks, housing, physical environments, geographic location, access to health services, food security, early child development, gender, culture, and language are some of the complex and inter-related social determinants of health. (2021, para. 1)

Of the many social determinants of health that affect online learning, lowering student success is the outcome when even a single factor affects a student. Over the past five years, repeated narratives of poverty and housing insecurity play a role in having detrimental effects on learning in my own online classroom. With students having to choose a different course because not having the textbook would reduce their achievement in the course, I realized the need to start looking at the open educational resources (OER) that I had learned about at a 2018 conference. Realizing that the students may not have consistent access to the online learning platform because of their housing insecurity, realizing that students choose courses based on the cost of the resources, made me more aware of my expectations and the assignments that I create and the resources that are needed for my courses.

Poverty

Among the research of poverty faced by students, some of the leading research on the poverty faced by our students come from the University of Alberta demonstrating that education has more costs than just the education itself. “The fees associated with this education, however, can overwhelm students. These costs include, but are not limited to: tuition, textbooks,

mandatory non-instructional fees, rent and utilities, groceries and other costs that come with being a student” (para. 1). In the few courses where I was using a textbook, the question I got asked most often by email prior to the course starting is, “Is the textbook optional?”

Knowing from my own experience that student loans only go so far and having made course selection when applicable by the cost of the textbooks and resources needed, I know the feeling of dwell and overwhelm that can be felt when a student is not able to afford the textbook. In 2021, I only have one course that needs a textbook and I am looking for ways to eliminate it all together. “The rising cost of textbooks is influencing students’ choice of courses, as well as the quality of their learning experience once they are enrolled in a course” (Stein et al., 2017, p. 1). On opening enrollment day in April 2021, the textbook course was full with 60 students by noon. That afternoon, I sent out an email that there is a textbook for the course, and slowly I have watched as students unenroll and new students enroll in their place. At some point, I will change this inequitable course.

Housing

My own experiences of housing insecurity are most notable from my time as a student. Between couch surfing, staying with friends and only being able to secure six month leases that forced me to move mid-term, or mid school year, the constant search for a roof over head was worrisome. Having to pay a deposit on a new place, while waiting for the return of a deposit on another had negative effects. I remember being a young, single mom studying to become a teacher and wondering if I should buy diapers or food. The University of Alberta (2019) describes indicators of homelessness as:

being evicted or forced to leave their residence, couch-surfing or staying with friends without paying formal rent, and sleeping on campus because they had nowhere else to go.

These relatively commonplace behaviours are linked with greatly increased risks of food insecurity” (para. 2).

In 2020, many of my students were forced to leave their accommodations due to the pandemic as residences on campuses worldwide shut down.

While many social determinants of health are diminishing success for my online students, the number of students who indicate poverty and housing insecurity either together or as separate indicators has only increased over the past two years. In relation to online learning, having daily access to wifi, an expectation of my own online learning experience over two decades ago, may not be feasible. The knowledge that these inequities affect my students change the expectations that I have of my students and change how I create the course that my students need.

Creating the courses my students need

In relation to Teacher Education, I do not create the courses that I teach at either of the universities. The outcomes are specific to the professional standards and provincial requirements of obtaining teaching certification and there are many sections and students enrolled at the same time who need a consistent experience. The courses are pre-created and although I have asked, “Who are the Indigenous authors on the reading list?” or when I noticed for one particular course that all the resources were urban authored, I asked, “Where are the rural voices in this rurally-based program?” But my questions go unanswered. My sessional contract where I asked these questions was not renewed.

Instead, one example of a course that I created in 2020 is a Professional and Technical Communications course for engineers. While this isn’t my usual realm of Teacher Education, the course is important for the students who enroll to develop their communication skills and a high number of the students are English Language Learners (ELL) with different languages being

their primary language. Designing a course without a textbook and that only uses open educational resources was a result of my research in how to decolonize my online classroom. It was also my response to taking action for the United Nations SDG's for education to ensure that no matter where a student was learning from, they would have no additional costs, they would not have to go without a textbook, and that the course would be accessible on mobile and not require long durations of WIFI usage. It was a necessity with the pandemic and the needs of students to be able to just show up online and get some work done or be able to print the modules on their own and complete them offline. But the key to the course design was that I was meeting the students where they were at, acknowledging the inequities that they may be facing, and hope that I am making a small difference in their quest to become an astronaut at NASA or the next Bill Gates.

In Summation

By examining what decolonization means globally and diving into the United Nations SDG goals for education, my path to decolonizing my online classroom is progressing, but I am not finished yet. By addressing the inequities that may be affecting the learning of students in our classrooms, we can choose to design courses that make learning more accessible and obtainable to all students. Choosing open educational resources, choosing anti-racist resources and establishing expectations that ensure the success of students who many have sporadic Wi-Fi, we can ensure that we are reducing how the social determinants of health are affecting the students in our classroom, at least in regard to poverty and housing insecurity.

James (2018) describes that students just want to feel safe in their learning environment and explains the neuroscience that surrounds this. "Building rapport is a large component of building relationships which create safe learning environments and support student engagement"

(p. 5). Building upon this idea, creating a classroom that addresses inequities starting with course design can give us a headstart on building the relationship and creating a safe place for students despite the online inequities of their learning situation. But we also need a safe place for educators as part of decolonization efforts where we practice deep listening and value all perspectives, even if it is not the one a school or post-secondary institution wants to hear.

If education is a human right and a goal worldwide, then online education must be accessible and responsive to the challenges of our students. In courses that I do not create, I have decided that I can focus on the students who are in my sections and decolonize in other ways in my live sessions or in my open office hours, in the resources that I offer to extend the learning and in who I invite as guest speakers. For the courses that I create on my own, I can focus on ensuring that my courses are accessible and pay attention to digital equity starting with the education goals set forth by the United Nations and auditing the inequities of my students in each section, and with every enrollment. And like many digital pedagogists, I can teach with a decolonizing, equity lens.

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