



PROFESSORS
WITHOUT
BORDERS

DECOLONISATION DISCOURSE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

CONFERENCE REPORT

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This report has been peer reviewed by Dr. Caroline Varin and Tenzin Bowe

INTRODUCTION

This webinar in collaboration with St. Mary's University was held on 28 May 2021. The panel was chaired by Rachel Warnick of Professors Without Borders. The panelists included Dr. Caroline Varin, CEO of Professors Without Borders and senior lecturer at Regent's University London, Chandni Hirani head of Africa Programmes at the London School of Economics, Chiedza Mutsaka Skyum Program Lead - Global Challenges Faculty at the African Leadership University, and Ed Gonsalves director of the Cooplexity Institute and senior lecturer at Regent's University London.

The panel began by addressing the broad question, 'What is Decolonisation?' The Oxford English dictionary defines Decolonisation as undoing the persistence of colonial thinking and practices in our current institutions. As the panelists discussed, Decolonisation includes a history of empire, domination, and the ongoing struggle for liberation. It involves highlighting marginalised and neglected stories. Decolonisation must use history as a tool to dismantle the current systems that can be oppressive. Decolonisation looks at who, where, and what is taught to students in different parts of the world and why.

The panelists discussed the idea that the higher education system must be addressed as a whole in order to achieve Decolonisation. In addition, institutions must move away from the 'all knowing white male professor' structure that currently exists. The panelists stressed that Decolonisation is not simply about changing the curriculum, but adding humanity to the classroom. For example, professors sharing their personal experiences and struggles that might have an impact on their teaching, and discussing the unique needs of each student individually. Every student comes to the classroom with a unique background and a different set of experiences, and in order to decolonise higher education, students' unique challenges must be heard and embraced.

The education system as it exists today holds every student to the same set of rules and standards, which do not account for the different backgrounds, abilities, and opportunities students are afforded in life.



Define what Decolonisation means to each of you and how does it define your teaching practice?

Chiedza Mutsaka Skyum: Chiedza began by explaining that the word Decolonisation brings to mind the history of empire and domination and the liberation struggle throughout the world. In addition, the education system has been going through a liberation struggle of its own. She explained that Decolonisation's key goal is to challenge narratives that have come out of colonisation. Discourses and stories that have been neglected in the past need to be brought to light. Looking at the curriculum alone is not enough. Chiedza asked, what are ways educators can challenge the colonial legacy of the educational system as a whole?

Ed Gonsalves: Ed explained that he approaches the topic of Decolonisation from the background of Otto Scharmer, founder of U Lab and Theory U, a course that empowers educators using the key phrase 'how do we move from the ego to the eco?' Ed questioned how to move himself away from the self centered position as a lecturer in business with international students, as he cannot possibly relate to all of the different experiences and backgrounds they bring to the classroom. He queried, what does decolonisation mean for enterprise and business?

Chandni Hirani: Chandni explained that she is in an interesting position, as she sits at the cross section of STEM and social sciences. She asked, what does it look like to decolonise different disciplines? Chandni explained that she has not done the research on the theories behind Decolonisation, but strives to approach the topic from a practical perspective.

Caroline Varin: Caroline answered that history plays an important role in Decolonisation. She explained that assuming that all educators have the freedom to decolonise is not true, as in many instances, curriculum is mandated by the government. Caroline queried, how independent should teaching be from what is mandated by the government? She went on to say that building the idea of unity has historically been done by the military, and therefore decolonising is going to be politically charged. Caroline's focus is building tools that allow educators to teach beyond the curriculum. The whole system is built on a white patriarchy, and decolonisation must include de-gendering and focusing specifically on educating women. She concluded that a key concept of Decolonisation is empowering students to make decisions beyond what they are presented with.

What problems need to be confronted in the various spaces and disciplines you exist in, and what are some practical implications?

Chandni Hirani: Chandni explained the importance of having ownership of your own narrative and the information you produce. Currently, she is working in a Circular Economy space, and she pointed out that the global leader in the field is a UK-based organisation. She wondered how her students can take advantage of the wealth of knowledge this UK organisation brings, but still have ownership over their own work. Chandni explained the importance of a shift in thinking from 'participate to create' in taking ownership over the knowledge you produce.

Ed Gonsalves: To explain why he is interested in the topic of Decolonisation, Ed pointed to the dehumanising effects of colonisation. He suggested that educators examine techniques that have come out of the struggles over the centuries for decolonisation, beginning with the American colonies. Ed emphasised learning the 'world' rather than the 'word.' He queried, how do we silence ourselves (teachers) and move to amplify those in front of us (students)?

Chiedza Mutsaka Skyum: Chiedza presented the question, how do you decolonise in fields where knowledge is perceived as fact? For example, $1+1=2$ is a fact, but how this fact is taught can be challenged. Chiedza continued, diversity and representation matter but are not substitutes for doing the work of decolonising. She concluded, allowing for co-creation of the curriculum with students can inspire them to take control of the transformation of the history of colonisation. In other words, not one man or one authority saying what is, but working together to create what can be.

Do we have to reconstruct the entire framework of the education system? Must we dismantle and rebuild?

Caroline Varin: Caroline suggested that change would not be top-down, but rather spring from grassroots efforts. She reiterated that while diversity is important, most universities in the world are homogenous. Decolonisation will not trickle down. It does not matter how diverse a classroom is, knowledge will always be missing from somewhere. Knowledge has limitations, and diverse voices must be brought to these homogeneous environments to address these limitations. Caroline presented a fundamental question, how do we educate educators?

Ed Gonsalves: Ed continued that he is always afraid of radical alternatives because he is guided by Liberation Theology from Latin America. He tends to not want to burn things down, but rather, improve them. Ed emphasised that paradoxes must be acknowledged, and there is work to be done to build a better future from the pain that we feel now. He believes that the fires of change are always lit. Ed concluded that there is 'energy and frustration and anger and happiness,' and he would rather work where those struggles are than 'burn it all down.'

Are we moving the needle at all in the process of Decolonisation? And if so, how?

Chandni Hirani: Chandni queried, what does it look like to abolish education as a whole? She offered the example of the African Leadership University, as they build upon the existing education system to make something new. Chandni explained that we have opened up the door to the conversation of Decolonisation, but still have work to do. She continued by discussing the 'unschooling movement' in early education, in which children forgo traditional school in favour of learning practical life skills at home. Chandni concluded that education is inherently colonial because of those who have access to higher education.

Chiedza Mutsaka Skyum: Chiedza agreed with Chandni that we are not there yet in terms of Decolonisation. She explained the ways in which responding to COVID-19 as an educator put this into perspective for her. She asks, what did it mean to move to online classes for the African Leadership University students? The experiences of the students were extremely gendered. There are a number of factors that add to the educational experience that we have yet to meet, although we have taken a step in the right direction. She adds that the role of the facilitator in the classroom is no longer a figurehead. It is important to come across as full human beings who have their own struggles. Showing vulnerability to students is an important tool in Decolonisation.

What advice do you have for practical ways to practice Decolonisation?

Ed Gonsalves: Ed began by explaining that there is a difference between discussing decolonisation and actually doing it. For example, medicine has to be tailored to the needs of different communities.

Caroline Varin: Caroline added that, although she does not work in STEM, she has noticed that the same subject is taught differently in two different places, languages, et cetera. For example, knowledge of how to treat a rough cough is not homogenous in all countries. She gave the example of the shortcomings of AI technology, which operates with significant biases. All sciences have limitations and therefore room for decolonisation.

How do we take the conversation about Decolonisation beyond academic spaces like this one, address resistance to the topic, and bring more people on board?

Caroline Varin: Caroline offered that Professors Without Borders facilitates knowledge exchange. The organisation allows people to have a different experience than what they are presented with. Students are the next educators so it is important to empower them. She reiterated that the key question is how to educate educators, and queried, how do we shift their mindset?

Ed Gonsalves: Ed added that learning must go beyond the classroom. Organisations like Professors Without Borders knock down the walls of what is possible in the traditional educational setting.

Chiedza Mutsaka Skyum: Chiedza explained that it is important to give students tools to take control of their own education.

Chandni Hirani: A technique that Chandni uses is to put emphasis on being 'skills driven.' For example, choosing relevant case studies that relate to the part of the world where she teaches to make it more relevant and relatable.

Ed Gonsalves: Ed explained the importance of connecting students in the classroom to those in the surrounding community. Ed wonders how he can raise consciousness in his students and 'keep the fires burning' in them to make change. Undoing assumptions is an important aspect of this, he explains. He tries to amplify voices that are not his own. In London, such a multicultural city, different perspectives are always present.

Caroline Varin: To conclude, Caroline asked who gets to decide what skills are useful and for who, and where? She explained that she can't say what is most beneficial for Decolonisation, but she can acknowledge the challenges that students from different backgrounds face. Students don't always remember what they hear in class but they always remember how they feel. Acknowledging what students need and how it can relate to a professional environment is key.

CONCLUSION

The panelists discussed many practical ways to decolonise higher education as an educator, including, enabling students to have power over their own education, addressing emotional intelligence in the classroom, being vulnerable about the subjects that they are not experts in, and giving a voice and space to those who hold more knowledge in the area.

Many challenges exist around the issue of decolonising higher education. First, schools and universities that are run by governments often have mandated curriculum. Although things are changing for the better, higher education is still lacking in diversity and Decolonisation demands representation. Often, universities attempting to diversify their staff fall into tokenism, which is representation without actually giving marginalised people a voice of their own.

All of the panelists agreed that change cannot come from the top down in the higher education system. To decolonise the education system, you must first decolonise yourself. Working alongside students to push change forward is a valuable tactic.

Professors Without Borders is an important organisation in the Decolonisation effort in higher education. By facilitating knowledge exchange, Professors Without Borders gives a voice to a diverse range of professors. PROWIBO understands the power of representation, and aims to give students the best range of knowledge from professors all over the world.