
Decolonising the Curriculum in a Politics and International Relations Module

Decolonising the curriculum increases student engagement and encourages critical thinking skills by stimulating intellectual interests in how cultural perspectives have come to be formed.

Area of Focus

A review of the literature and content for the 'Understanding the Cold War' module to move away from Western perspectives and offer a more diverse curriculum.

Context

New to NTU, the module lead was already interested in developing a decolonised curriculum. When the Success for All data highlighted low engagement and lower success rates for certain students, Jon took the opportunity to revisit the content of the module. The aim was to increase student opportunity to engage with critical thinking.

Approach

With support from his course team and an educational developer, Jon systematically reviewed the literature to move the content away from "Western perspectives" and increase the capacity for critical thinking. He aimed to embed a decolonised, decentred pedagogic approach to stimulate intellectual interest in how cultural perspectives are formed, and how these perspectives often differ to traditional Eurocentric views.

Interventions

The lectures now incorporate perspectives from a different continent each week, and the students are invited to discuss how they feel about the readings. They are encouraged to think about relations of power, privilege and positions on truths. Students' discussions tend to explore cultural and political trajectories of privilege. For example, a discussion of readings from critical race theory might lead students to explore how the issues concerned are reflected in foreign policy. Music from the region in question is also incorporated to engage students in discussions of power and privilege. Jon offers students an opportunity to design their own assessment questions to apply thematic issues (for example, gender) to different regional or national contexts.

Initial Outcomes

Reflecting on the first iteration of the module, Jon has found that:

- By offering perspectives that differ from traditional Eurocentric views, the content of the module now reflects the backgrounds of the international students (including many Erasmus students) who are attracted to the module
- Although a minority of students choose to write their own assessment questions, some of the best responses have come from these essays. Jon believes this is because where students have identified their own research interests—i.e. areas which had not been covered in the module—then the assessment becomes a genuinely creative engagement with critical thinking and academic development
- Students are most keen to engage with critical and political discussions when these are framed as "global perspectives". Jon and the teaching team are keen to explore this concept further.

Challenges and next steps

Writing a critical essay is perhaps one of the most challenging assessment tasks. Although most students are engaged with the political and cultural perspective of the creation of knowledge, Jon has found that they need considerable support with essay skills. To supplement seminar sessions, Jon and the PIR team are constructing a resource bank of 'how to' guides for students to improve their academic writing practices. Jon is hoping that with the development of projects and initiatives in the school of Social Sciences, he can continue to refocus the course in line with discourses that will engage students in critical debate.

Contact details

Jon Mansell, module lead, Politics and International Relations

jon.mansell@ntu.ac.uk