

Reshaping Social Relations in Educational Theory and Practice: A Global Teaching and Decolonizing Collaboration

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ABSTRACT

In fall 2018, students from Adelphi University in Garden City, New York and from the University of South Africa in Pretoria embarked on a pilot collaboration to engage conversation and cross-experience exchange. The initiative was rooted in the Adelphi course entitled, “The Reshaping of Social Relations in the Modern World” and through a network of students connected with the University of South Africa (UNISA) Department of Anthropology and Archaeology and decolonizing studies and projects in South Africa. This article provides a theoretical framing for this collaboration and why it holds tremendous potential for engagement, heightened global awareness and developing kinship cross-borders as well as a discussion of the process and the content of this engagement and experience through the lens of student participants' reflections. Intrinsic to this experience is an exploration of how a psychology of inequity can be challenged.

KEYWORDS

Collaborative teaching, decolonizing pedagogy, global teaching, inequity

Theoretical Bases for Collaborative Practice in Teaching

Teaching philosophies embody the worldviews, values and horizons that an educator deems most critical to one's teaching practice, generally reflects the perspectives one holds most dear. Teaching is an engagement that intervenes to fashion and cultivate students who will, in turn, intervene in particular ways in the world. In this way, teaching as a profession is thus integral to shaping social relations not just in the classroom, but also in society much more broadly. Whereas teaching is usually thought of at an individual level, as lessons imbibed by the student and differences made to that person, a decolonial praxis of teaching transcends the individual and cultivates a communal ethos.

As Fanon has said "...to constantly introduce invention into life... to endlessly create myself to build the world of you." (Fanon 1952: 179-181). This is a sensibility that is antithetical to the Imperial *I* who is essentially closed off from knowing the imagined "Other". Separation and closure are quintessential colonial traits. These divides are ubiquitous in the prevailing geopolitical dispensation. Marked by nation-states and other colonial borders, separation and therefore mis-recognition characterize social relations. Founded in what world systems scholars such as Immanuel Wallerstein and others have called the long 16th-century (Wallerstein, 1974), divides and distinctions are characteristic of all colonial relations. Antagonistic relations between nations, peoples, genders, religions, spiritualities, sexualities etc. are the norm and mis-recognition and misrepresentation a salient feature of almost everything.

In this scheme of things, Africa particularly continues to suffer the brunt of colonial

muting, undergirded by a veil of separation though she is deeply immersed in global webs of entanglement. Set on terms and conditions from elsewhere, this immersion continues to inform her relationships with the rest of the world. Africa has been assigned roles of perpetual servitude and infantilization precisely because of the history that began in the long sixteenth century. Stripped of an adult status, Africa is positioned on the global stage as handicapped and humiliated and could be said to vacillate between a structural position of exploitation, erasure and seeming irrelevance. (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013).

The injustices of such a position are extensive. All means possible should be harnessed to right this wrong as part of the "decolonizing" project. Higher education in particular should be seized with an ethical imperative as a matter of course for the "structures of knowledge in westernized universities" reflect the four genocides and epistemicides of the long 16th century (Grosfoguel 2013). One strategy to bridge separation, divide and misrepresentation is through lived experiences that make it possible to "abandon ethnocentric and racist systems of logic and therefore, to place the undiscussed in the center of discourse" (Asante, 1990, p. 140). Facilitating platforms of cross-border collaboration that foster communication allows higher education to develop students' understanding of real history and contemporary realities, rather than producing technicians for the labor market with false knowledge about themselves, the world and history.

The call to decolonize knowledge speaks to the need to liberate epistemology from the constrictions that characterize colonial and western education. Scholar Dr. Amos Wilson charges that the university teaches useless knowledge that serves embedded colonial structures and calls it "higher education" (1999, p. 58-61). In this way, the

utility of the academy as a particular intervention in fashioning social relations is called into question. The narrow-mindedness of the horizons that standard curricula strive for, especially in regard to its emphasis on growing individuals for their own benefit, points to the importance of closure and separation as quintessential traits of colonial education that is bereft of the recognition of the need to "...to constantly introduce invention into life... to endlessly create myself to build the world of you." (Fanon 1952: 179-181)

Tuck and Yang (2012) warn against a tendency to hollow out the notion of decolonization by equating it to processes, that while necessary are insufficient for the transformation of education. They remind us that decolonization is first and fundamentally about land restitution and reparation of indigenous ways of life that take their cue from nature, innately interconnected and open to fluidity. Closure and separation as cornerstones of colonial relations are informed by the adage "I think, therefore, I am" (Descartes, 1960; Grosfoguel, 2013), the posture integral to higher education that governs relations between the colonized and the colonizer. It is this very imperial position that has wrought so much damage and caused untold harm on all living beings.

Maldonado-Torres (2007) posits that this arrogant, inward-looking and self-valorizing position implies that others do not think and therefore do not exist. The Imperial *I* indiscriminately reproduced by an education system that is inward-looking, engaged in soliloquy by a knowing being who assumes an unknowing Other was challenged by the design of this collaboration. This engagement was a direct response to the perennial question posed by Spivak (1988) about whether the subaltern can speak. This project sought to move the subaltern from a position of always being "deeply in shadow" and "muted", thereby affirming her agency,

albeit within the limitations of Westernized education. This collaboration opened though could not fully accommodate other modes of knowledge that UNISA student participants might have introduced. This was an ambitious pilot project, and therefore limited in its scope. Its ability to radically shift horizons was limited to a beginning recognition of an "other" beyond books, conference papers and journal articles. To be fully developed and sustainable would require institutional commitments and corresponding resources.

This initiative has important lessons for a new relationality that can be fashioned as a way to bridge the gap that colonial closure has normalized. One of UNISA's tag-lines is to facilitate "learning without borders". This aspiration applies to both practical and attitudinal dispositions in an open e-learning and teaching environment and invokes a number of important notions. In this endeavor, learning is open-ended, sensitive to ground-up possibilities that work against top-down authoritarian (en)closures and control. The teacher is not the center of the learning experience rather, a facilitator of a process and space in which student voices are heard and supported. In this empowering exercise students can realize their own voices and power and learn from each other.

Such a pedagogy aspires to what is characteristic of a liberation education with potential to transcend the mere transferral of information and inculcate deep cognition. This collaboration sought to center issues of mutual interest that arose organically so students could set the agenda of their own learning. The interactions centered in what could be regarded as world problems rather than discipline-specified areas of focus. Participants were involved with issues beyond the elitist bubble of the academy and confronted questions as wide-ranging as land, health and wellbeing, violence, and others. Conversations dared to look beyond the obvious, courageously

altering and replacing conventions with the possibility of new realities. Trans-disciplinarity as an approach, is an active and deliberate rejection of dogma, ideology and closed systems of thought and explores new ways of thinking and engagement. Learning through such a framework, is thus bold and does not shy away from any discussions, giving effect to the truism that the curriculum is everything and everything is curriculum, mimicking life in its fluidity and dynamism. Such open-endedness that challenges barriers opens up questions that have settled at problematic notions reflecting the detachment of the elite class whose writing and discourse forms the fabric of what generally makes it into set curricula.

The notion of learning without borders also foregrounds “visiting” and reciprocal learning. Simpson (2017) argues that visiting... “...has the potential to bridge theory and practice and is thus organically transformative as it expands horizons and can animate the imagination beyond its comfortable confines.” “Visiting” challenges insular understandings. Internal barriers are also interrogated, affording students an opportunity to grow in robustness at all levels. Visiting with one another fosters engagement that ethical protocols are not able to inculcate and has the potential to unlock research agendas with more ethical and just sensibilities. The mental universe about one another shifts, impacting relationality in a positive way by potentially undermining the “new wine, old skins” way of being-in-relationship between the erstwhile colonized and colonizers.

Writing on the imperial nature of research relations during the height of HIV/AIDS in Africa, Chilisa (2005) posits what she calls an “error of sameness” by which she means that Euro-American homogenizing power has the ultimate impact of erasing and muting the diversity of voices, least of which of those whose lives it is that are at

the center of the collaborative effort. This error of sameness, goes beyond research, characterizing all aspects of whatever relationship the West has with the Rest (Chinweizu 1975); education should be actively working towards undoing this error. This collaboration was one such attempt.

Against the grain of epistemic closure, and thus decadence, this model of teaching sought to create a space for “a hundred flowers to bloom” (Mao, 1957) in challenging the conceptual frame that constrain other voices from being heard. Chilisa (2005) argues that in addition to the colonial framework that seeks to fashion the world in the imperial mold, research is caught up in frameworks that are alien to those who are researched. From this point of view then, the frame of reference when seeking to understand those researched is the accumulated alienation found in written text. The space created by this mode of teaching enabled a triangulation that is otherwise not routine in learning across borders. The idea of creating space allows all voices to be heard and in turn, to be reckoned with. In this way, a linear understanding is disrupted to include a complexity that is otherwise elusive. Students are provoked in multi-dimensional ways that provide a glimpse out of hegemonic Eurocentric discourses. The assumed universal validity of written text about Africa, in particular, is troubled, with new understandings emerging. Knowledge is co-created and co-owned by students as agents of knowledge creation in their own right. This process allows for learning to engage with multiple epistemologies and be shaped by epistemological diversity.

Learning without borders is also a commitment to vulnerability, an intention to resist and disengage from the colonial syndrome of domination. The marginalized move to the center – on ethical and just terms and the dominant choose to shed the arrogance that comes with this positionality

and succumb to a higher ideal – that of making community. Ethical listening is thus fostered. “To have a voice is to be human. To have something to say is to be a person. But speaking depends on listening and being heard; it is an intensely relational act” (Gilligan, xvi). Through ethical listening and conversation, new grammars and language that challenge the establishment are possible. Collaboration disrupts and troubles boundaries and forges horizontal alliances. A new kind of globalization that is not unidirectional is made manifest. In the process of these conversations, students in the United States reposition their thinking of “Africa”, repeatedly. Africa is not a wasteland of time-space compression, with troubled relations. Students from UNISA played an active and present role in rendering a new transformed image of South Africa. The subaltern no longer speaks through self-erasure, and demonstrates power, wisdom, clarity and strength in intellectual and spiritual grasp of the modern world.

Learning without borders also means staying true to the salience of history in contemporary relations. Through engagements such as the one fostered by this collaboration, students are brought to the sharp understanding that history is as present as it is past. The global devastation of colonialism is brought into relief as experiences are shared. This allows students to unravel the logic and machinations of colonialism and its aftermath, coloniality and aids deep learning that piques rather than dumbs curiosity and interest. What could potentially be a flat subject devoid of animation has the possibility of being brought to life, cultivating critical thinking. Engagements led by students defy the control of meaning, enabling the following feats: ...interrogating colonial discourses, imploding their political partisanship by introducing, in strategic points of their critiques subaltern texts that sees the colonial moment differently, that use other

knowledges – as distinct from western – to articulate another view of the self, of history, of knowledge-power formations, resisting in the process the burden of colonialist epistemology and in fact mounting a counter-assault by enabling previously disabled languages, histories, modes of seeing the world (Mishra 2000: 1086).

Pedagogy that challenges closure and separation by troubling boundaries demystifies subjects that are rendered simply in written texts. More than that, connection subverts the tendency to think of oneself outside of an-other. By engaging in subjects whose importance is global in reach, students were able to see their entanglement with one another. This discussion flows both ways. Communication thus fosters community in which the abyssal line (Santos, 2007) is undermined and the West is disabused of its assumed positionality as the knower of first and last instance. The colonial inclination to develop, instruct and civilize (Chilisa, 2005) is disrupted. By the same token, the traditional weakness, which is almost congenital to the national consciousness of underdeveloped countries (Fanon, 1965: 149) is dealt the same blow. In a way, this is applied learning embeds deep and complex learning with the potential to facilitate the un-learning of problematic notions and misinformation in order to re-learn drawing from a triangulated frame of reference.

Development and Implementation of the Initiative

Following decolonial summer schools in Amsterdam, at UNISA and in Barcelona, a collaboration that would give rise to this initiative was agreed upon by anchor lecturers from the respective universities. The collaboration was informed by the decolonial adage that *We Make the Road by Walking* (Horton, Freire et al, 1990) which effectively enjoins embracing the

uncertainty that comes with pathfinding and ground-breaking. Building on transdisciplinary forays already being explored at UNISA in which the UNISA anchor lecturer was a central player, and reflection by the Adelphi faculty member about how to “globalize” curriculum in the U.S. context as part of an Adelphi University Teaching Fellowship, a pilot teaching collaboration was developed to cross-border interactions between students at the two universities. This ground-breaking initiative sought to create a space for applying “decolonial” ideas through rigorous intellectual exchange across a number of barriers, including the misrecognition of Africa as “backward”.

The opportunity presented to students on both sides of the divide to engage as equals was timeous given the incessant, resounding call to “decolonize” education. Students were able to simultaneously listen and share their understandings, observations, hopes and dreams through the lens of their lived experiences. The South African cohort was clear, from the word-go, that they partake in these conversations as equals, with as valid a knowledge base as their U.S. American counterparts. This, in itself, was a revolutionary posture given the unequal power relations that characterize the two nations. South Africa is among the global leaders in conversations both in critique of coloniality and about the urgency of decolonization in all realms of the social world.

This encounter was, by design, aspiration and in implementation, an unsettling of settled paradigms. The issues that were discussed reflected deeply on the basic logics and assumptions that undergird colonial knowledge. In this way, students engaged in profound critical thought and exchange that opened up an even deeper understanding of coloniality and awareness of possibility. For instance, given the multidisciplinary make-up of the UNISA cohort, reflecting on the coloniality of space

and place opened up new vistas of understanding: why this design? What basic tenets underlie it? What politics are embedded in it? What possibilities are thwarted by it? Who benefits? What nefarious acts does it allow? What are the intended and unintended consequences? These are critical questions in the “decolonizing project”.

Adelphi students were privileged to be provided entry points into ways of thinking, feeling and being that are outside the western, Euro-dominant, heteronormative patriarchal dominant narratives that they had been exposed to all their lives. They learned about academic excellence and rigor that exist embedded in intellectual and practical resistance to coloniality. They initially struggled to envision a world outside the frames they have been taught to believe as truths, but when the necessity and the possibility registered, they too began to think about how museums, schools, justice systems, architecture and aesthetics might look outside of traditionally accepted assumptions about how society should be organized.

These are deep questions that when engaged in from a comparative analytical purview by students whose lived experiences differ, but who owing to the global nature of coloniality, do experience the vestiges of the same, fostered greater appreciation of coloniality and of possibility. A discussion of architecture opened up discussions that touch on every other aspect of life, whether private or public and the concept of globalization is made real. This initiative made practical compression of time and space. In a small way, it opened up the worldviews of students on both sides of the geo-political divide. As a tool for teaching, this was an effective way to inculcate a “citizen of the world” imagination in the students in ways that a “study abroad” experience for a young person from the United States might not embed. Students experienced a sense of

accomplishment for having engaged in such a manner that left a lasting impression and afforded them an opportunity to “travel” to other parts of the world. This was especially the case as many of the Adelphi students and families originated from outside the U.S. and shared this diversity with the class¹. Technological glitches notwithstanding, students on both sides grabbed this opportunity with both hands and were excited for it. This was a gift that would long inflect their academic walk in a positive way.

The question of decolonization loomed large in these discussions. Designing decolonial institutions and spaces was an added, very ambitious, bonus. The imagination that is thwarted by the colonial “one-size-fits-all” closure was liberated by this radical opening up. The decolonial walk is never finished. It never closes. The journey is just as important as the destination. That students drawn from such diverse backgrounds could hold coherent, far-reaching conversations in so short a space of time points to the importance of creative pedagogy design and forward-looking educators who recognize that success can often be measured in the process and not solely in a predesignated outcome.

The Initiative, through the Lens of the Academy

¹ Among the 14 Adelphi students who participated, 4 were of white and European descent, while 10 have family heritage with themselves or their parents born in India (3), Colombia (1), U.S. African American (2), Guyana (2), Zimbabwe (1), and the Philippines (1). Their religious backgrounds included Christian, Muslim, Hindi, Sikh, and Jewish. In this sense, the cohort did not mirror the U.S. student population and may have led them to be particularly open to the exchange and learning outside of the frames they had been taught throughout their schooling. The South African cohort comprised of students who can be distinguished by their political affiliation/leaning rather than ethnicity as political activity is a central

To address the challenges of embedding global learning deeply within the curriculum and foster greater understanding of the lived experiences of people outside the United States and global hierarchies, a new course was developed at Adelphi, piloted during the fall 2018 semester. The course sought to raise awareness of the continuing impact of coloniality and the history of resistance, particularly in the global South; and engage students in opportunities that expand their technological capabilities and usage to foster deeper learning in the global context.

For University of South Africa students, the goals were to expose them to the truism and reality of the westernized University – found everywhere in the world, teaching the same body of knowledge with little, if any, consideration of the local context. Recognizing ongoing resistance to this injustice was also an important component. Understanding the parochial nature of U.S. society and its problematic take on Africa, this opportunity was used to de-mystify globalization as presumed progress and reveal its character as a hegemonizing force. Students lamented this unfortunate state of affairs, bemoaning the loss of heterogeneity and the wealth that comes with this. The urgent need to re-shape global relations was thus underscored.

The American Council on Education Center for Internationalization and Global Engagement (CIGE)² states that effective

feature of student life in the country influencing their views. Student politics in South Africa traverse issues pertaining to education in the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements that encompass issues affecting the quality of life of university support staff in the #Outsourcingmustfall movement. Student politics are centrally concerned with Black existential issues that involve all aspects of their lived experiences.

² <https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/Mapping-Internationalization-2017.pdf>

internationalization of higher education goes way beyond the traditional practices of study abroad and international student enrollment. The organization asserts that institutions need a more comprehensive commitment to embed global learning in multiple aspects of the University structure including the curriculum, faculty development and research. They argue that global learning is an essential part of academic learning in this historical moment and that the technology exists to facilitate this process. What they speak less about is the development of relationships between students at Universities in and outside the United States as a particularly meaningful and do-able component of global learning.

Similarly, the Association of American Colleges and Universities Shared Futures: Global Learning and Social Responsibility project “was built on the assumption that we live in an interdependent but unequal world and that higher education can prepare students to not only thrive in such a world, but to creatively and responsibly remedy its inequities and problems.”³ They assert that it is “through global learning that students are prepared with the knowledge and commitment to be socially responsible citizens in a diverse democracy and increasingly interconnected world.”⁴

With few students participating in formal study abroad programs, it is essential to develop other ways of building bridges. While the presence of international students increases contact with people outside the United States, and language requirements are useful though this is insufficient. Traditional models of global learning generally focus on these strategies. We attempted to bring together the scholarship on teaching and learning regarding high impact practices and an emphasis on global learning.

The course was conducted through a collaboration between the Adelphi faculty member (Melanie E L Bush) and a faculty member at the University of South Africa (Nokuthula L Hlabangane). Dr. Bush is a research fellow at UNISA and is working with Dr. Hlabangane on other scholarly projects such as the development of a decolonial “counter-text” for the social sciences with another group of international scholars. It made great sense to attempt this collaboration as a living tribute to worldwide student demands to “decolonize education”.

Students from Adelphi University and the University of South Africa engaged in conversation and cross-experience exchange on a weekly basis. The initiative was rooted in the Adelphi course entitled, “The Reshaping of Social Relations in the Modern World” and through a network of UNISA students connected with the Department of Anthropology and Archaeology and decolonizing studies and projects in South Africa.

The course began with an examination of how the emergence of coloniality and the modern world reshaped social relations. Adelphi and UNISA students did readings and engaged conversation through Skype, Slack, WhatsApp and email on topics such as land reform, how decolonization can occur, the impact of coloniality in contemporary educational systems, the relationship of knowledge and epistemology to structures of inequality and much more.

Students then explored how we define and design “decolonized” institutions, social relations and ways of knowing, being and thinking. Through written and oral exchange of ideas, articulation of the principles that might anchor decolonized spaces, students compiled their initial thinking about “decolonized” architecture,

³ <https://www.aacu.org/shared-futures>

⁴ Ibid.

justice, education, beauty and aesthetics, art, literature and health care. The course closed with presentations that described these designs and shared the experience of this profound exchange and collaboration.

The course closed with presentations that described these designs and shared the experience of this profound collaboration. The class will run again after a period of reflection, with students playing a leadership role in how to continue making this experience authentic, challenging, and transformative.

Several participating students from both universities shared their experiences in a session of the conference “Unsettling Paradigms: The Decolonial Turn” in July 2019, at the University of Pretoria.

The involved faculty made a presentation at the International Studies Association meeting at the University of Ghana in August 2019.

The overall value of this project includes the following:

This collaborative investigation of the reshaping of social relations in the modern world, both what occurred with the emergence of coloniality and what is taking shape in contemporary times, expands on the examination of race, class, gender and intersectionality through engagement of the theoretical framework of the coloniality of power that is much more widely embraced outside the United States. The content of the course therefore exposed students to new ideas. This was particularly true for students at Adelphi as critiques of coloniality and analysis of what is meant by decoloniality are less traditionally present in the U.S. context. The students from UNISA were also able to learn from the experiences and questions posted by the Adelphi students. This provided important exposure outside media framing of who

young people in the U.S. are, and what they think and value.

The course provided direct engagement and interaction about this material with students who have had a different lived experience and exposure to ideas. This course provides a model that can be used to establish similar classes in coordination with other universities.

In the process of the intellectual and social engagement of the material and exchanges related to lived experiences, students learned new methodologies for interaction that can ground themselves globally with the use of technology. The collaboration demonstrated that developing relationships “cross-borders”, holding conversations about world events (historical and contemporary) and learning through experience of the profound interconnection of all humanity, can take place, given the technology we now have.

The outcome was extraordinarily powerful as will be clear both from student reflections on their experience and the “decolonized designs” they created.

Decolonizing Exchanges and Decolonial Designs

In this section, several students’ proposals are briefly summarized. These relate to art and aesthetics, architecture and space, beauty, and youth leadership.

Art and Aesthetics

Raquel Adler, (Adelphi Fine Arts major, Sociology minor) opened with the following quotes:

Transforming social relations in the modern world is definitely easier said than done! Some of us are very aware of the effects of colonialism, capitalism, eurocentrism, and white supremacy. We recognize the violence and structural

unsustainability of the systems that organize societies around the globe. But just because we are aware, doesn't mean everyone is...

Our current pedagogical and institutional structures have been and continue to be constructed in ways to enforce these systems. Knowledge is power, and when knowledge is withheld from us, we are left powerless. However, once we have unlocked understandings the resident power is unleashed and we can achieve anything. Once we decolonize our minds, we can begin to dismantle the structures.

Decoloniality is essential to reshaping our modern world system because our current system is based on coloniality, an unsustainable structure. The true history and its effects are hidden from us. Through the four genocides, epistemicides, and patriarchal projects of the 16th century (Grosfoguel, 2013) we are left with epistemic racism and sexism as foundational organizing principles for society.

Our pedagogies are built on the Eurocentric lens of universalism, where one person's lived experience becomes a universal narrative (that being the white, male, and Christian elite). This idea of the blanket universal truth leads to the production of disenfranchised populations who are socialized to distance themselves from their own cultures and become alienated from their own identities in favor of the "truths" of the Euro-America that rejects them. (Grosfoguel, 2013)

Raquel describes coming to understand unequivocally that "The epistemologies of the Western university are set up upon these notions of mental slavery" (Hira, 2016). She notes that the most challenging part of this class was the decolonized design proposal because "all of my ideas of decoloniality were still based in coloniality" She speaks to the power of

connection with the UNISA students, and in particular credits Bongisa for helping her understand that "representation is not limited to subject matter, but it is also about the artists' themselves, curators, art historians, and everyone involved. Coloniality affects everyone and it is a collective."

About her experience, Rachel conveys that,

I had never really spoken to anyone from another country. As much as I would like to say that I am open, I am also extremely sheltered and tend to live in my own little bubble. My personal problems and experiences often consume my entire world, and it is hard for me to see that as much as I shouldn't minimize my problems, I have to realize that other people are going through something. This is one of the most important lessons that I took from our collaboration, as I listened to everyone's personal struggles ...I realized that I need to shift my mindset to a more decolonized one – and have now incorporated meditation and spiritual healing into my daily life and routine.

When we did guided meditation as a class together, it truly came full circle for me: that is what decolonized learning is all about. Activities like that are so important and vital for our mental health and psyche, so why has it never been incorporated into class? It was so beneficial for me to see our learning environment as not just a place for absorbing wisdom, but also a place of healing.

One of the articles read in class was on neuro-decolonization (Yellow Bird, 2012); there's urgency of recognizing this as an essential component of the "decolonial project". This process is different for those of us living in colonizer spaces versus regions that have been colonized however it is important to recognize that the structuring of the world's people in rigid hierarchies and separations has done

damage to all of our capacity to think, learn, and grow.

Raquel concludes with a recognition that our collaboration was an opening, not an ending or a destination. She shares,

After taking this course, I have new friends at Adelphi and new friends across the globe. During our interviews, were able to talk about impactful issues we all face due to colonialism, but we were also able to form a bond and laugh over things like real friends. We shared personal stories, anecdotes, thoughts, and ideas - and I couldn't be more grateful to have met everyone in this class and discuss these touchy topics in such a safe and collaborative space.

Bongisa from UNISA has given me invaluable advice about how to be a better friend, a better ally, and a better person overall as a colonial being wanting to move forward towards a decolonized space. This journey towards decoloniality journey has definitely been a long one, but it is nowhere near over. The conversation is now open, and ready to be had.

Decolonizing and Uplifting Youth Leadership

Cyril Thabo Makwakwa (UNISA Graduate: BA Social Sciences, Honors Sociology) was one of the two lead students from the University of South Africa. The respect that the other students had for him and his clarity of vision brought them to the collaboration. He is a true leader. Thabo opened his reflection about the experience by saying:

The world is changing; the global community is awakened from the dark ages and fast coming to a realization that it must adapt or die. However, what death could the globe face after having survived billions of years?

The death of the global world I refer to is that which fails to learn from its past mistakes, develop young global leadership that would not only bring about positive change to the highly divided world, but also connect progressive youth from across the globe and establish sustainable relations. The world needs old people to learn from the young and the young to also draw knowledge from the old people.

This collaboration came at a time when I was trying to contribute into the voice of young people in South Africa, highlighting the challenges faced by youth who are reeling from many forms of social injustices coupled with socioeconomic exclusion, most notably lack of representation in spheres of leadership.

Thabo conveys his evaluation of this collaboration by stating that “this initiative promoted creativity, innovation and fostered new thinking. Students were at the center with the purpose of creating an environment where young and old are afforded equal opportunity to contribute.” He describes our collaboration as “applying a values-based and servant leadership approach” by faculty.

From his perspective, Thabo shares that:

Leadership is influence and not age influence. We were allowed to be ourselves, come up with our own perspectives and contribute as much as we could. We had the freedom to develop our individual worldview cutting across gender, culture and race. The class turned into an ideal world constituted of young people from around the world, it represented a new generation of not only academics but also leaders who in their respective communities. We became leaders who would add value and deliver sustainable social relations.

Thabo writes that “at the beginning of the collaboration, I was concerned about how

the class would turn out as it had people of all races with the majority of students being from Adelphi. My fears disappeared as diversity was well managed by the entire team. Valuing each other's contribution as well as enabling space for constructive criticism, stood out as the strongest point for me." He quotes Adelphi student Carolina Medina who said that "negative thoughts must be replaced with practice of positive thinking, speech and actions through mindfulness and generate new thinking which liberate the mind from oppressive thinking" noting that:

The contribution of each student in the group reflected multiple intelligences (cognitive, emotional, spiritual and cultural). This was from the realization that indeed, the world is struggling to close gaps between areas such as race, cultural, gender, religion and intellectual arrogance.

Collective wisdom and leadership among Adelphi-UNISA students helped me realize that we are all equal and have something great to contribute to the world. This is despite the toxicity of university rankings that are divisive and limit students from engaging, importing and exporting knowledge for the betterment of our global community."

Thabo concludes his evaluation of this experience by saying:

More interactions such as this must be encouraged in institutions of higher learning, politics and other forms of social participation so that young people may learn that the challenges faced by our communities require collective leadership. This type of leadership holds everyone in high regard, and sees no difference according to the color of one's skin.

We need to create spaces for different views, be open-minded, respect diversity and other people, and be willing to continue

learning about our world. The alternative form of education through online participation challenges the colonial standardized methods. It connects people of different origins through an open simplified platform that does not impose a way of learning - rather it relies on the people to shape both the process and the outcome.

We speak one common language which is love and peace. All of us aspire to create a better and safe world where there is no looking down on others regardless of our demographic. We learned that differences can be used to teach and learn about each other's worlds. It was a significant revelation that perceptions are not natural but formed as a result of symbolic interactions in our respective environments.

I learned from Adelphi students that education has no boundaries; no ranking and absolutely no ending. Our histories learned in schools are carefully scripted to feed society what is appropriate to the writers.

We built knowledge together! I was stimulated by the class and found it to be penetrating and thoughtful.

Decolonizing Beauty Standards

Carolina Medina (Adelphi University Graduate, Interdisciplinary major, Fulbright Scholar English Teaching Assistant, Costa Rica) She focused on visioning beauty through a decolonial lens. She says:

Notions of beauty are often conveyed through images that are Euro-oriented and first world centered. This idea and practice emerged with coloniality, white supremacy, Eurocentrism and standards about appearance that embedded the social hierarchies developed with the emergence of the modern world. Concepts of beauty are rooted in the division of humanity

between the superior and inferior, worthy versus unworthy. Oppression, competition, and a single narrative about what is appealing and attractive conveys denial and disrespect.

The modern, colonial concept of beauty erases, disregards and ignores those who do not have access to resources to meet their basic needs no less, to purchase items or services that are believed to enhance one's appearance. Indeed, the World Health Organization estimates that 2.1 billion people lack safe drinking water and 4.5 billion people who do not have safely managed sanitation⁵

The conversation then about dominant notions of beauty are absurd and convey the valuation and lack valuation of different peoples' lives. Meeting basic needs in a capitalist society means consumption.

White supremacy, imperialism and capitalism has perpetuated the idea that humans are just never enough. Facial and body symmetry are at the core of defining beauty standards and those standards are often Euro-centric. Women of color are often sexualized, objectified and fetishized for having different facial/ body features. Current beauty standards revolve around the idealization of a thin body, youthfulness and whiteness. Consequently, the beauty market is focused on targeting female insecurities especially those of women of color. The huge market for skin whitening and brightening products is just one example and a violently dangerous one, at that.

Eurocentric norms establish a standardization of beauty with little to no room for multiple ways of being, and diverse appearances. The problem with our

current concept of beauty is that loving ourselves unconditionally as well as embracing our roots has become a radical idea.

Carolina proposes three steps toward decolonizing beauty: Recognize and accept that we are all mentally enslaved; Practice neuro-decolonization; and Replace Problems with Vision. She concludes saying that "Beauty would no longer be what a person looks like but how a person is in their spirit and way of relating to others. Decolonizing of aesthetics to me is the acceptance that beauty exists in multiple ways, not just a physical one. Once we recognize that we perceive beauty from a single dominant narrative we can move forward to self-empowerment, self-love and self-recognition... Designing a decolonial space within a social institution was one of the hardest projects I did throughout my academic life. Critiquing ways coloniality has impacted our social institutions is easy but developing a space where inclusivity, healing and acceptance is present is extremely difficult. I had been exposed to a single narrative regarding beauty as long as I can remember and thinking about self-love and acceptance of my own natural physical features was a radical experience."

In describing her experience of the collaboration, she states that:

Interacting with UNISA students on a regular basis was one of the most meaningful experiences for me. We exchanged ideas on structural realities. I was able to listen and learn how coloniality impacted their ideas of beauty and helped me realize that decolonizing beauty is not an easy task. This is a painful subject because of how much we have internalized

⁵<https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/12-07-2017-2-1-billion-people-lack-safe-drinking-water->

at-home-more-than-twice-as-many-lack-safe-sanitation

these standards. Seeing beauty as a physical thing is colonial, we need to break away from perceiving beauty as only external and focus on how empowered we feel as individuals, it's about acceptance, authenticity and self-love."

Decolonizing Architecture and Space

Bongisa Msutu (UNISA graduate, Bachelors in Anthropology, Honors) pursuing a graduate degree in Architecture or Urban Planning. She opened her discussion of decolonizing space by saying:

The decolonial philosophy is about making visible what has been made invisible. It is about unmasking the logic of coloniality in order to achieve justice and humanization. It is also about recognizing that there is not just one legitimate way of being – universal, colonial and modern – but rather there are many – pluriversal, decolonial and indigenous – most of which contradict the modern colonial, yet are just as legitimate. These many ways must be recognized and be made visible.

At the risk of homogenizing, for most indigenous communities and societies, their concepts of space and identity are linked to the relationships between their people, landscape and their faith; and to their cultural worldview. Most importantly, according to Tuck and Yang (2012:5), indigenous peoples' sense of identity is directly tied to their land. This, the taught modern theories and histories of architecture does not consider.

She goes on to identify markers constitutive of architecture that she asserts must be addressed in a decolonized spatial plan: history, theory, use, representation, design, construction and destruction of space and structures. Bongisa explains this by saying:

For indigenous people, the use and representation must portray their values of their relationships with one another and

their environment. The construction and destruction (materials and methods) will influence the design of the architectural artefacts, of which will be influenced by the history and ever-moving culture of its people.

To be able to do this, architects, designers and the fraternity must be pluriversal in their understanding of the people they design for. To not impose, but rather respectfully understand and accept.

Values of most indigenous societies are tied to land, human interactions and belief systems. Bongisa noted that her interaction with one of the Adelphi students of Sikh descent who spoke and wrote of the pilgrimage site of Sri Harmandir Sahib, convinced her that "the idea and practice of decolonized architecture and design is not as far-fetched and inconceivable as most advocates of modern colonial design would have us think. In fact, it is necessary for the redefining of humanity."

Bongisa shared that the collaboration taught her that "it is possible to create such learning spaces that allow for respectful, robust and necessary conversations with people from different backgrounds and socialization, while learning from one another." She notes, "My hope is that students from all disciplines, especially within the architecture discipline, are able to make the leap of not only interdisciplinary learning but of viewing architecture as a social science and cultural practice that must interrogate the modern colonial gospel of design."

Conclusion

Our fascination with the adage to learn and teach without borders was the driving force to facilitate this meeting of unlikely partners. The decolonial programs we participated in impressed upon us the

inward-looking decadence of Eurocentrism. “If we want to understand why standard schools are what they are, we have to abandon the idea that they are products of logical or scientific insight. They are, instead, products of history” (Gray, 2008). They are products of a history of coercion, control, discipline, servitude and unquestioning of authority. Education, including higher education, is hostile to undirected exploration and thus thwarts natural human instincts. The need to liberate education from the constrictions of coloniality is urgent if we are to fashion a healthier, more robust and involved student body. The decolonial walk is about smashing colonial borders that thwart human potential resulting in unformed and de-formed individuals who are self-involved.

In addition, as Dr. Hlabangane shares, “For sure, Africa has received bad PR, to say the least. In my unfettered love for the continent, I use every opportunity to show that, in fact, Africa is a place of beauty.” Our knowledges, philosophies, ethics, relations, and overall notions of being put humanity at the center. This idea of humanity is not a warped one that reflects colonial hierarchies. It is one that promises radical democracy that posits the equality of all planetary and terrestrial beings. It was on the basis of the need to open up and engage in earnest conversation, against colonial soliloquy and closure. I am grateful for opportunities to engage.

A particular limitation of this very short exchange is that diverse knowledge systems could not be explored. Contrary to Eurocentric notions of being that are linear and closed, African conceptions of being can be characterized as circles within circles that are fluid and thus robust in nature. This has important considerations to how power is understood and enacted. Such understandings can bring a much-needed change to social relations that are currently caught up in webs of destruction. The need

to liberate all living beings from the conceit of colonialism begins in the classroom and it begins with facilitating spaces in which students can breathe and thus thrive.

We close here with comments from two of the other student participants:

One way to decolonize our way of thinking and practices is to be open to endless possibilities. Just as we discussed in class, not all of us have the same ways of thinking or perspectives but that doesn't mean that they're always good or equal. We should let our minds roam yet know the boundaries which were not set by coloniality rather just humanity.

Our power to revolutionize the world around us begins within us. Honoring the purpose and value of our names, languages, heritage, and identities is fundamental to restoring our sovereignty from repressive forces. When one is taught to loathe every ounce of who they are, vengeance through love for oneself is the epitome of all solutions.

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Dr. Nokuthula Hlabangane, PhD, UNISA Faculty member, was awarded a PhD in anthropology by the University of the Witwatersrand in 2012. Her work has been an incessant search to uncover and do justice to local knowledges – how subject often made objects through Eurocentric filters can be given an authentic voice. While the theoretical framework for her PhD was political economy, her work has evolved and now uses decolonial epistemic frameworks. This applies to her understanding of ethics, methods and teaching as well. Her work is always inflected by the philosophy of Ubuntu that seeks radical recognition, conversation, redress and reckoning. She has written on subjects as wide-ranging as the political economy of teenage pregnancy in SA, the Marikana massacre and the logics that made that possible in post-apartheid South Africa and on the coloniality of methods. Her other work involves vulnerability and resilience in the SA context. (hlabanl@unisa.ac.za)

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