Trauma and Emotion in Decolonising Anthropology

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Abstract

Teaching a module entitled 'Decolonising Anthropology' means having to approach numerous difficult and challenging subjects with students. It also means having to respond to and reflect on the traumatic responses that these topics bring about in individuals. During classes in this module, on the use of human remains in biological anthropology, students have become overwhelmed by the subject matter and removed themselves from the laboratory. Students have also expressed anxiety and feelings of uncertainty due to the assessment of this module, where we encourage the production of alternative assessment types and learning outcomes as a reaction to traditional essay style submissions. This paper highlights the impact of learning about decolonising the curriculum and challenging traditional pedagogical approaches on undergraduate students studying anthropology. Reflections from students will be discussed, including transformative feelings from overwhelm to having constructive conversations about unsettling and unfamiliar topics, the juxtaposition of conventional academic thoughts against personal emotions and narratives, and how thinking about decolonising anthropology has been an unsettling experience. Personal reflection will be given to how such 'risky teaching' (Harrison et al., 2023) can help create more effective teaching and learning within the discipline and help develop a trauma-informed pedagogy for anthropology.

Keywords: Pedagogy; Decolonising; Trauma; Reflective.

Introduction

Teaching a module entitled 'Decolonising Anthropology' means having to approach numerous difficult and challenging subjects with students. It also means having to respond to and reflect on the traumatic and emotional responses that these topics bring about in individuals. When the curriculum for this module was designed it was anticipated that the subject matter could lead to difficult conversations during the term. Discussing the impact of colonial activity, racism and slavery on our discipline could lead to difficult self-reflection, what Harrison et al. (2023) call 'risky teaching'. The overall final reflections from the module were that students benefited positively from taking a decolonising lens to the content and that teaching a decolonised anthropology was affirming, seeing the practices as not just a box to be ticked but a process that must be consistently engaged with. As expected during the course of the module discomfort over the topics covered did affect students but these were not the only areas of trauma to materialise within the student cohort. Wider areas that could be considered 'safe', such as the use of space in the classroom and the department in general and the freedom with the assessment were also the cause of anger and frustration. The authors are alert that the word trauma can sometimes be used as a stand-in for difficult or challenging experiences. As such, we use trauma to describe the extreme and visceral reactions which students had towards human skeletal remains, in addition to echoing the language which students themselves used about their experiences in this module. In doing this, the authors are not minimising or negating the lived experiences of the students, but instead are opening space for them to use the language which they feel is most appropriate. Another area that arose from the discussions of the module was the imbalances in authorship of academic knowledge (Abimbola, 2019). Whilst this came through in topics of decolonising global health wider consideration was given to who are the gate keepers of such knowledge and as such this paper is co-written between the lecturer (TB) and a student who participated in the course (AL). In writing about decolonising pedagogical praxis with consideration for who we write for and the position from which we write, then it is important to include the student gaze to rectify any imbalance. As such we approached this work as a joint exercise, discussing themes and structure together and adding our own individual perspectives throughout, including the review stage. Teaching and learning are experienced very

differently depending on which side one is positioned and hence only one side of the experience would be given if written only by the academic.

Teaching Decolonising Anthropology

The 'Decolonising Anthropology' module was designed to encourage critical reflection on the legacies of the colonial encounter for the practices and theories of different sub-disciplines of Anthropology. The module was co-taught by staff from the three main areas of Anthropology taught at Durham University, biological, social and health. We aimed to provide the students and also the staff teaching on the course, with a set of critical tools to reflect on our own positions and practices within post-colonial structures of power, prejudice and inequality. This included co-producing practical strategies for 'decolonising' Anthropology and engaging in 'decolonised' pedagogy, through the co-development of forms of teaching, learning and assessment. In this module we wanted to not only cover academic topics relevant to decolonising in anthropology, but also use a decolonised pedagogical praxis, not using the 'banking model' of knowledge deposition and passive listening described by Freire (1970) but a more active model of teaching and learning. Ruth et al. (2022) states that as teachers we need to rethink *how* we teach, including our roles in the teaching process, the content, the class structure and the assessments we use, and this is what we attempted to do with this module. With a critical and engaged pedagogy lecturers contrive to deliver content but also interact with students to drive debate and discussion (Aliakbari and Faraji, 2011). This meant to critically address how we teach, aiming to move away from the traditional lecture/seminar format into a more holistic classroom.

Students were asked to provide a self-reflection on the module as part of their overall assessment and we found in these that many had, as anticipated, emotional responses to the academic content. It was not an aim to have students be emotionally harmed in the classroom, by having 'a productive use of discomfort' (Murray and Kalayji, 2018) it was hoped to bring about a more considered and deeper level of discussion. Drotbohm (2022) stated that we should not assume that students who deliberately choose anthropology for their study are necessarily willing to deal with the discipline's inherent challenges such as that posed by decolonisation. Here Drotbohm (2022) is talking about the introduction of trigger warnings and how highlighting potentially disturbing content does not mean avoiding the confrontation itself. In their self- reflection one student wrote that:

> …the seminars I attended in the module Decolonising Anthropology kept shocking me with the harsh realisation that colonial legacies polluted the discipline, in our museums, our skeletons, our papers, our institutions and our learning approaches. Thinking about decolonisation has been an unsettling experience.

This sort of unsettling experience was the more typical response anticipated, given the topics covered in the course. However, the self-reflection of students showed that this module led to more transformative experiences than simply feeling discomforted by difficult knowledge.

> Engaging in the module 'Decolonising Anthropology' has further encouraged reflexivity in relation to my privilege as a White student in a largely White space (with only 2% of the student population at Durham being Black)

The internal challenge is echoed by another student's experience, particularly given the wider context of the university in which they are studying.

> Taking a step back to really look at the institution which I am learning within has highlighted how processes of colonialism are not just legacies, but live and pressing issues.

One of the subject-specific knowledge learning outcomes outlined in the module pro-forma was that students were expected to choose a format appropriate for the assessment. Students were required for their formative assessment to choose their mode of assessment in collaboration with staff and to develop assessment criteria specific to their choice. They were asked to prove that their assignment choice meets the criteria. As such we incorporated into our class schedule sessions specifically designed to work together with students, either individually or in groups, to develop their assignment goals. As this was for many the first time they were asked to develop their own assessment we gave suggestions to the types of work they could complete, including blog posts, critical reflections and podcasts. The guidelines were that this should roughly be the equivalent of submitting a piece of work up to 2500 words. We also asked that the students provide a short reflective piece on why they had chosen a particular assessment medium. In terms of topic content, the co-teachers took classes on the history of decolonisation in anthropology, on global health, decolonising photography and museums.

Decolonisation of pedagogy was threaded through the content to give a background to what we were trying to do and to provide time and assistance with the development of the assessment work.

Decolonising Assessment

Undergraduate assessment is something that has historically struggled to meet the needs of student diversity (McArthur, 2016) and this was an important part of how we wanted to approach this module. Nieminen (2022) states that "exclusion is deeply woven into the fabric of what we call 'assessment'" and although he is writing more about ableism with regard to disability and assessment this can also be seen in terms of wider student diversity and the decolonising of pedagogy. To do this we followed the module outline which stated that a learning outcome was to devise a personal mode of assessment, whether individually or within groups. We dedicated time in the schedule for discussion around this and gave suggestions as to the types of work that could be included such as podcasts, webpages or reflective journals, though these were not meant to be exclusive.

In looking at the socio-cultural, historical and political roles of disabled students in higher education and assessment, Nieminen (2022) discusses the concept of *positioning*, likening this to Foucault's concept of subject positioning. This is understood here as discursive positions on which students build their understanding of themselves (Nieminen, 2022) and can similarly be applied to students within a decolonising classroom. The position of 'the student' in relation to assessment is often taken as normal and incontestable, that is they take the exam set for them by 'the teacher' or, as often in Anthropology, they write an essay on the subject they have been learning. Within these opposed positions there is no agency for the students as they have no way to negotiate or reposition themselves in relation to the assessment procedure. By giving students academic freedom to explore how they wished to be assessed we were aiming to provide an inclusive and decolonised learning environment. One student reflected very positively on this as it was the first time they were able to have autonomous control over their work that fit with their dyslexia diagnosis. Some students tackled their own past learning experiences, with one choosing to critically reflect on an anthropology essay they had written in their first year, stating "*reading back on this essay was uncomfortable*" and recognising the prejudices and biases they had come into university with and how these had changed positively with their progress through their degree. However other students found the experience more challenging, in ways that link to the hierarchical and structural ways that university teaching is often practiced.

AL describes below her reaction to the design of the assessment. As a mature and first generation student she had learned to navigate university terminology and processes (Lambert et al., 2022) and now was being asked to un-learn.

My (AL) experience of conducting and devising an alternative form of assessment are of anger, frustration, and, eventually, liberation. When finding out that the assessment for 'Decolonising Anthropology' would be open form – allowing students to devise their own assessments to best fit their topic - I was initially excited. After nearly three years of study, the standard practice of essay writing had become almost formulaic. However, when faced with mounting deadlines for other modules and the higher weighting of marks in third year, learning a new skill, such as podcasting, at such a crucial time seemed constraining, rather than freeing.

I opted for a written form of assessment, as I had a proven track record of attaining good marks in essay-based assignments. However, I was told that taking this route could lead to a lower mark as there was a push in the module to move away from essay writing and explore other types of assessments. It was this point that I started to cry. Leaving the classroom, I let the anger that I had felt rumbling for the last 30 minutes of the lecture roll down my face. I came to university as a working-class, mature student, and I am also the first in my family to attend university. I have worked hard, battled with academic language, and read as widely as I could to feel like I was on an even footing with my peers. By being discouraged from writing an essay I felt that I was being penalised for succeeding in someone else's world.

I used that anger in my assessment. I still used a written form of assessment, but I challenged the academic language that I had struggled with and wrote in my own voice. That meant colloquial lilts, the contraction of words, and a more conversational approach to writing. It is encouraged in anthropological writing to 'find your voice', but I have often seen this as an extension of the 'voice' present in literature; a way of identifying your style in the writing. I wanted to extend 'voice' to speech, to make present how I would speak to someone in my everyday life. While the end result was certainly more polished than my formative – which was essentially a one-

sided conversation on paper - I felt more comfortable writing this assessment than I had many others during my degree.

In the end, I found writing the assignment liberating. I gave myself permission to be exactly who I am, which in turn gave legitimacy to my writing. This not only helped me to rethink how assessments are conducted, but how knowledge is produced and communicated in anthropology. I wrote for myself, for the woman I was three years ago, walking into unknown territory and pleading for some clarity. However, while the experience was eventually liberating, I did not need to go through the initial anger and frustration. If inclusive assessments had been woven throughout my degree, I would have felt more confident in choosing an assessment format. First year would be an ideal time to introduce inclusive assessments, as students only need to pass first year, rather than the assessment counting towards 60% of their degree outcome.

AL describes here how she has learned to be an 'ideal student' (Wong and Chiu, 2021) and has achieved good grades doing so by assimilating the behaviours, here how to write the 'ideal' essay. However in her own voice this is described as a 'battle' and can be seen as cultural 'code-switching' (Lambert et al., 2022) in order to fit in with her peers. Koutsouris et al. (2021) examine this as being part of the hidden curriculum for 'ideal students' that universities unconsciously model. By learning how to write an essay by formula AL and other students have learned how to negotiate the hidden curricula whilst losing their own voice. One student worryingly echoed the formulaic proficiency in essay writing to the point that they described themselves as having embodied ChatGPT. Given these experiences regarding the challenge of decolonising assessment it is easy on reflection to see how this can have been traumatic to students.

Emotions and Experience in Decolonising Biological Anthropology

TB describes below her practice and reaction to teaching the content of decolonising biological anthropology and the emotional responses that students experienced during the work.

For my (TB) own discipline specific topic content I taught a session on my ongoing work on how to decolonise the biological laboratory. Consideration was given to the individuals (the human skeletal remains) we use to learn methods and theory in osteology and forensic anthropology and how the knowledge we have can be used in an ethical and decolonised praxis in the future. The content was delivered in short lectures interspersed with group discussions and visits to the Alan Bilsborough Laboratory in which the department curates the human remains used in teaching. Notice was given prior to the session and also during the class before students were taken to the laboratory that we would be looking at human remains and that students could opt out of the laboratory visit if they wished. What I had not taken into consideration when outlining my class was that many of the students taking this module were on the social or health anthropology streams and not accustomed to encountering human skeletal material. Within the laboratory I had laid out two skeletons that had been donated to the university from families of former medical students. I had discussed these skeletons in the course of the first mini-lecture as examples of colonial practices that allowed for a legal trade in human bodies and body parts in the past leading to human remains becoming part of the teaching of our discipline (Agarwal, 2024; Jones, 2023).

During the laboratory sessions I had the unsettling experience of having two students need to excuse themselves from the class due to being extremely discomforted by the subject matter and the proximity of the skeletons of whom we were discussing their difficult histories. Both students, one in each group, had physical and emotional reactions to the subject matter and the sight of the human remains. As a teacher this caused me to reflect on how to approach these issues. It is easy to become complacent when working with human remains to forget that this can be a difficult topic for students to experience, particularly those who have not selected to specifically study biological anthropology. This taught me that I must acknowledge that students have different personal narratives and these can bring about personal emotive responses. It was also a reminder that this topic and the physical encounter can have a visceral effect when compared to a subject being covered in the more clinical setting of a lecture theatre. I discussed the experience with one of the two affected students as they had written about the experience in their summative reflection and in the podcast that they co-produced as their assessment. The student commented that the podcast:

> …gave me the chance to challenge and reflect on my education. I really advocated to have one podcast focus on human remains and the study of bones because, as someone that typically focuses on Social Anthropology, it

> wasn't a topic I was familiar with and one of the first times in my degree I felt truly challenged by the subject matter.

This unsettling experience for myself led me to reconsider how important it is to regard the manner in which we challenge students and that we can unexpectedly push them too far in our aim to appreciate the complexities of the discipline (Weston and Djohari, 2020).

Conclusion

Fallot and Harris (2009) state that trauma-informed pedagogy is guided by the five core values of safety, choice, collaboration, empowerment and trustworthiness. In introducing and teaching the Decolonising Anthropology module our aim was to encourage collaboration with and empowerment of students through our pedagogical praxis. The reflected experiences of students suggest that we did not fully realise our goal. It is important to recognise where practice requires change and realistically it seems that we tried to bring in too much change at the wrong time. If we want to challenge student expectations, in this case with regards to the freedom of assessment, then bringing this at a crucial time in the undergraduate life cycle, just as they are having to concentrate on their own large research work, can lead to more difficulty than good experience. It was also a time when those students who had adopted 'code-switching' in their use of English (Lambert et al., 2022) felt that they had embraced what was required of them in their university studies. As AL writes, just when they were adept at academic language, having negotiated the hidden assessment curricula, they were being penalised for being successful at it. If we deviate from the normal expectations of assessment and embrace change it seems only right to give students the time and space to adjust to these changes. We can validate feelings of emotion and trauma in relation to these challenges but they need to be considered within a wider context of learning.

Building trust in the classroom between student and staff but also between the student body is vital to achieve effective teaching when difficult issues are discussed. The development of trust in the classroom is a clear objective that has been highlighted in the reflections on the decolonising module and by allowing for emotional responses should be part of this. It is important also to recognise that as a teacher you will not always recognise what topics will be 'risky' and linked to trauma in each individual student and it is thus important to be prepared to deal with unexpected reactions. As a teacher in this module I did not always get things right and I did not envisage the impact that the assessment would have on students. However, it is important to acknowledge when this happens and consider what can be done differently in the future.

It is important for me (TB) as a teacher to reflect on the discomfort I felt at having physically and emotionally upset students unintentionally by showing the students the human remains. This is not something that I take lightly. The wealth of experiences between being a student and being the instructor is too vast to allow oneself to think in terms of putting myself in their position. I had thought that giving a warning about visiting the laboratory and providing the option to not attend in advance was enough, but I had not factored in *who* I was teaching in this context. In future classes I will aim to be more conscious of the module cohort and personally aware of reactions of individuals before and during the session, making it clear that this is not a requirement but an option. More importantly I will instigate a conversation about the ethical issues of teaching with skeletal remains with an emphasis on how the students themselves perceive this.

Agbetu's '*Doing diversity, being diversity*' (2021) argues that "the vast majority of academic teaching (and administrative) processes seems an exercise in doing diversity instead of embracing the act of being diverse". In some areas of our teaching on this module I fear that we may have 'done decolonisation' rather than fully embracing the act of decolonising. A student comment in feedback ameliorates this to some extent, stating that the passion of the various lecturers in the module encouraged the cohort to recognise and confront the issues of decolonising in our discipline, but reflections from the co-authors of this paper suggest that we have areas that require continued work to fully decolonise pedagogical approaches and spaces within the teaching of anthropology. As we have discovered, trauma-informed teaching is not reserved solely for discussions of potentially sensitive topics but recognises that many students arrive in the classroom with past traumatic experiences (Carello and Butler, 2014: 164). Consideration should be given to the potential for emotional responses and reactions when developing curricula, especially but not only if the subject matter is difficult. Here we anticipated difficult discussion around topics of race and slavery, for example, but in reaction to the aim of using a decolonised pedagogical praxis students also engaged emotionally with the more unseen aspects of university education, including hierarchy and class. Recognising that discomfort is experienced in diverse ways amongst the student and staff cohort in any given teaching environment is important and noticing that

individuals who identify in any particular way, be it in ancestry, gender or class, can be affected by difficult knowledge in heterogenous ways (Drotbohm, 2022). To make it possible to continue to teach discomforting subjects such as decolonisation of whatever discipline, university practices will require transformation to provide greater time, space, recognition and support to staff and students who will be experiencing the challenges these important changes bring together and hopefully within a safe and trusting environment.

Recommendations for Decreasing the Experience of Trauma and Emotional Responses in Learning and Teaching Decolonising Anthropology.

1. Include diversity statements from teachers for the module as suggested by Ruth et al. (2022) that set out their intentions and values, with the aim of making the classroom more inclusive and interactive from the outset. With such a clear statement at the start, including a statement that students have a voice in the direction of the teaching.

2. Putting decolonisation and reflexivity earlier in the curriculum in anthropology methods training

3. Highlight the need for reflexivity and positionality earlier in the module. Incorporate time for student and teacher reflections as part of the classes, give time for student voices during the teaching of the class.

4. Trust – if trust is built between students and between students and staff then hopefully students will feel able to ask questions, give critical feedback and direct the course of discussion without fear of frustration or pushback from staff. The aim is to create a collaborative and decolonised classroom, which whilst we may not have fully achieved so far be reflecting and learning from the experience of staff and students and considering our own positionality in the classroom we will avoid some of the trauma experienced by students so far.

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Disclosure Statement

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