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Co-constructing a Liberated / Decolonised Arts Curriculum

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Co-constructing a Liberated / Decolonised Arts Curriculum

Abstract

This article presents a case study of liberating reading lists through a staff-student collaboration in a UK arts university. It characterizes reading lists as a familiar but under researched feature of academic life and discusses their practical and symbolic role in maintaining Western / Eurocentric / White disciplinary canons, and how they inform what it means to be 'well read' in a discipline. The collaborative project, which was initiated as Liberate the Curriculum work, brought together students, academic staff and librarians to audit and review reading lists, and reimagine them to represent multiple narratives, reflecting the diverse and international student population of the university. The article explores the challenges of auditing reading lists and identifying more diverse resources, and the complex relationships between identity and knowledge production. The authors use Critical Race Theory to comment on the relationship between race, colonialism and the arts, and how racism is reproduced within the academic environment. The project methodology is described, with an evaluation of the project as a student staff collaboration, and the learning and impact within the institution.

Keywords

Reading lists, liberation, decolonisation, student staff collaboration, curriculum co-creation

Introduction

Over the past decade, universities in the United Kingdom (UK) have been paying increasing attention to metrics highlighting persistent inequalities in experiences and outcomes for specific student groups, namely international students and home students categorised as Black Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) who are statistically less likely to attain a 1st or 2:1 degree (the highest awards for undergraduate degrees in the UK). Sector research investigating these so-called ‘attainment gaps’ highlights multiple causal factors including the curriculum, and emphasises the importance of reviewing curricula in partnership with students, and ensuring that race is given sufficient room to be discussed as a standalone issue (NUS and Universities UK 2019, pp.44-48). In 2016 the UK National Union of Students (NUS) launched a sector wide #LiberateMyDegree campaign ‘to transform and decolonise education so that it is more representative of the diverse student body’ (NUS 2016). This has been accompanied by a range of individual campaigns by Student Unions across the country directed at the ‘liberation’ and ‘decolonisation’ of curricula.

University of the Arts London (UAL) offers an extensive range of courses in art, design, fashion, communication and performing arts across its six colleges, and is home to a diverse body of 18,000 students from 130 countries. The institution is proud of this diverse and international community and is committed to ensuring an inclusive and supportive environment for everyone (UAL 2019a). The University consists of six Colleges, Camberwell College of Arts, Chelsea College of Arts, Central Saint Martins, London College of Communication (LCC), London College of Fashion and Wimbledon College of Arts. The university Student Union (Arts SU) launched their initial Liberate the Curriculum campaign in collaboration with Library Services, with a bookmark intervention inviting library users to identify sources and scholars they believed to be underrepresented in the collections. The Arts SU campaign has since progressed from library collections to auditing course content (Arts Student Union, 2019) building on their demand for ‘all reading lists to include at least 60% Women and 45% BAME contributions, to better represent the current UAL student body’ (UAL SO WHITE, n.d.).

This article case studies a 2018-19 Liberate the Curriculum (LTC) project at London College of Communication (LCC) which involved academics from ten courses working in partnership with students and librarians to liberate their curricula via selected course reading lists. It explores the notion of being ‘well-read’ by interrogating the epistemological values underpinning the inclusion and exclusion of sources on academic reading lists. In developing a context and critical framework for the case study, the article first examines the purpose of the reading list in academia, the role that librarians are playing in liberation and decolonisation, and how reading lists influence the development of disciplinary canons and the dissemination of knowledge. The article then hones in on western arts education and brings in Critical Race Theory as a tool for understanding how its distinct pedagogies and curricula uphold western dominance and Whiteness.

Arts higher education (HE) in the UK continues to value an enquiry and practice-based pedagogy and is as such not wholly or consistently reliant on textual sources or outcomes. The notion of being ‘well read’ in this context extends beyond the book and library, to the gallery and museum, the theatre and catwalk, the film studio and atelier. The ‘reading’ list consequently takes on new meaning and purpose for academics in arts HE, many of whom are also creative practitioners, understanding, assessing and producing knowledge in forms and ways beyond the written word. After explaining the project methodology, the LTC case study offers further insights into such epistemological variations. It discusses the project’s findings against its aim to develop frameworks for liberating curriculum through staff-student partnership, and outlines considerations for

furthering the work of curriculum liberation and decolonisation in partnership with students and other sector developments for tackling racial inequality.

Context

The Reading List in Academia and The Role of The Academic Library

Reading lists are a familiar and possibly under-researched feature of academic life within the western university model. The literature of librarianship has generally focused on the reading list management system as a functional tool, describing system features, the challenges of embedding and ensuring the necessary engagement of academic staff, as well as the challenge of supplying in-demand materials. However, Brewerton (2014) and Stokes & Martin (2008) both discuss staff and student expectations and perceptions of the function and importance of reading lists. Reading lists are traditionally produced by a member of academic staff in line with their position as a disciplinary expert and authority, so the list is an indication of what is known and valued by that individual and what reading is required to be ‘well read’ in that discipline.

Reading lists have consequences: university libraries prioritise the purchase of reading list materials, so they heavily influence the development of university library collections and perpetuate the status and visibility of certain texts through ongoing use and citation, confirming their establishment within the disciplinary canon. The Open Syllabus Project (2019), has documented the occurrence of texts on reading lists in various disciplines. The project is large scale and international but with a concentration of data from North America. (McKie 2019):

The project has yielded some secrets, albeit with results that may seem depressing, and perhaps unsurprising. In terms of tracking scholarly canons, the initial aim of the project, these remain overwhelmingly dominated by white male authors – often, particularly in the case of the humanities, from the distant past.

Reading lists are more dominant in some disciplines than others, depending on the nature of the discipline and associated pedagogies. In the UAL context of enquiry-based pedagogies reading lists play a particularly varied role and alternative models have started to emerge. These alternative models center on the idea of an inclusive and dynamic resource list that students can construct together as they discover resources throughout the year, ideally contributing diverse perspectives and forms of knowledge. Specific examples at UAL include The Edit (Mendelson & Smithard 2018), an online resource list created by BA Fine Art staff and students at Wimbledon College of Arts in 2018-19, and from Central Saint Martins the MA Graphic Communication Design course reading list (Ross 2017), which students were invited to actively co-construct with course staff as part of their assessed coursework. However, co-constructed reading lists can also raise issues, of varying levels of engagement and maintenance, the perceived value of staff vs student contributions, and may not necessarily result in the desired outcome of increased diversity.

UK arts HE claims, increasingly, to have an international outlook and to embrace diversity. This is not, however, always reflected in the academic reading resources students encounter on their courses. The call to decolonise the university, curriculum and library has brought reading lists into the spotlight as embodiments of western centrism or Eurocentrism. This has resulted in the production of numerous ideal decolonised reading lists in various disciplines (Kureishi 2017; Haffner 2018; Phul 2019), but less commentary in terms of critical framework or methodology.

Library Services at UAL is committed to social justice and building collections that reflect plural narratives and perspectives. This can be challenging because of a lack of diversity in mainstream publishing and the library has developed archives and special collections that in some way compensate for this, as well as using a wide range of specialist publishers and other sources for purchasing resources (Morales Cendejas 2019, p.33-34). This work has become more urgent with the recognition of attainment gaps, leading to increased institutional collaboration as we look for ways to make and contribute to structural change. Research at UAL (Crilly 2019a) and engagement with critical librarianship (Crilly and Grandal Montero 2019) have provided insights that have led us to challenge familiar approaches to collection management, and question what forms of knowledge are dominant or underrepresented in our collections, and how this validation or exclusion influences the concept of being 'well-read'.

There has been a recent emphasis on decolonising the library, focusing on the colonality of knowledge and the implications for library collections, such as the historical framing of collections by Eurocentrism. Examining the role of reading lists in reproducing these frameworks, and the library's role in this, is a part of this work. It's important however to consider what can genuinely be described as 'decolonisation' and what is ongoing work in relation to social justice and diversity (Crilly 2019b; Tuck and Yang 2012).

Arts Education and Race

Scholars such as Sarah Pearce (2012) argue that arts education plays a key role in keeping Whiteness as an unquestioned norm that marginalises and/or excludes various cultural practices and perspectives. Other scholars have remarked that this dominance within the UK starts within the school curriculum, "shaped by white-coloured Eurocentric...standpoint" (France, Meredith & Sandu, 2007, p. 310) concluding that it is racialised curricular practices across all subject areas, including art and design that perpetuate inequality. Downing and Watson (2004), who explored graphic arts practices at secondary schools in England, noted that the content of the curriculum predominately acknowledged male, European artists (Downing & Watson 2004, p. viii). Therefore, Eurocentric perspectives are being preserved in higher education institutions, perhaps unwittingly by reliance on the familiar Eurocentric dynamics of the arts (Hatton 2013, p. 40), which routinely privilege populations identified as White.

The complex ways in which arts education is entangled with race has strong historical roots linking back to the Enlightenment era and beyond, when the modern conception of 'the arts' was conceived within a closely protected Eurocentric context. Coincidentally, it was also during the Enlightenment period that contemporary conceptions of race, including the concept of racial ordering, were created and used as the main justification for the colonial project. The task of European colonisers, during this period was inherently dependent on complex and wide spread racialisation of people, a central argument for the rampant process of theft needed for capitalist expansion; namely indigenous genocide, alongside the appropriation of "Black bodies and land" (Lowe 2015, p. 141). Certainly, racialisation and colonisation are thoroughly interweaved; with some stating they are the two identical sides of the same imperial coin (Wynter 2003). These colonial ideologies are closely aligned to the creation of "European civilisation as the epitome of human cultural evolution" (Herman & Kraehe 2018, p.210) and the idea of who is recognised as an artist that continue to shape the way arts education functions today. Undoubtedly, the development of an existing 'art canon' which is often considered within a framework that spans from 'Old Masters' to the 'Great Modern Artists' was influenced by the colonial mindset that sought to exclude the racialised as inherently lacking in the appropriate creative or cultural expression.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides an effective analytical framework to explore as well as deconstruct the frequently covert racial inequalities in interpersonal structures and systems within European communities, including higher educational facilities. As a theoretical framework, CRT efficiently uncovers the continuing dynamics of ‘race’ as a social construct, and the embeddedness of racism as an everyday norm (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Thomas & Peller 1995). Therefore, when referring to reading lists within arts education and the current status quo, it is important not to merely equate racism with colonialism, despite their intimate historic association. For critical race theorists, racialised power structures are usually organized by Whiteness or White racial hegemony (Stefancic & Delgado 2001) that dictate and maintain institutional practices including the content of reading lists. Using the lens of CRT which directly examines the covert and institutionalised methods of Whiteness in mainstream institutional systems, David Gillborn (2005) concludes that the patterning of racial inequity and subsequent privileging of certain knowledge is organised in such a way as to maintain the continuation of power dynamics within our social structures. These racialized practices might be tacit or even unintentional, though they are not accidental. Although it can be argued that overtly racist ideologies are not apparent in present day curriculum design, their legacy is evident in the Eurocentric emphasis they espouse, which implicitly reproduce them.

This has significant implications for reading lists as they tend to value the efforts Europeans have made to the world's artistic heritage, implicitly embracing the visual arts curriculum as the home of imagined White populations. These racialized curricular methods work by marginalizing other racialized groups, specifically those identifying as non-White, so the significant contributions of a global community to the artistic practices within England, Europe, and the broader worldwide context is often lost. Therefore, when such Eurocentric syllabi are taught in classrooms, they inculcate young people into racialised ideologies by introducing them into the attitudes and actions, and discourses of knowledge that form everyday learning (Foucault, 1980, p. 30), thus securing their longevity and hegemony. Therefore, liberating and decolonising the curricula is not only about changing course content and reading lists, it is also about how that content is taught and about the structural context within which it is taught. While the silencing of people of colour within arts education has been a persistent historical legacy, there are ways to resist the whitewashing of the arts, arts education history, and the arts curriculum. Opening the review of curriculum to more diverse members of the academic and library community through staff-student partnership is one way, as explored in the case study to follow.

Case Study: LCC Liberate the Curriculum

Project Introduction

In 2018 and 2019 students and staff were brought together at London College of Communication (LCC) to audit and reimagine unit reading lists as part of a two-year pilot project entitled ‘Liberate the Curriculum’ (LTC). The provision of a reading list in course handbooks and unit guides is an increasingly standard yet contested practice at UAL, and little guidance is offered to courses on what they must contain. College guidance on *Submitting Assignment Briefs* (2018) simply refers to the “provision of reading lists and/or indicators of appropriate sources” being “the key reading to complete the assignment, further reading can be included in the unit guide” (UAL, LCC 2018). Although such lists are not equated to ‘learning’, especially in the context of arts education which we have already described as being predominantly enquiry-based, they still offer ideas and language that shape how course discourse is created, forming perceptions of the types of knowledge that are valued or given most prominence.

Whilst a recent internal Student Survey suggests that the vast majority of students believe their course encourages them to “explore a range of culturally diverse course and research materials” (UAL 2019), the reading lists included on their courses are reflective of male, white, western-centric perspectives. Students on one particular course at LCC highlighted this as part of the tutor-led Still Waiting Discussion Group (2017) which focused “upon unacknowledged racialised, sexualised and gendered biases within ... course core reading lists” and which resulted in a powerful visual web browser display of the ‘pale, male and stale’ authors listed (S-A-D Boyz 2017). In this case study we detail the Liberate the Curriculum project’s methodology and discuss its attempt to challenge hegemonic ideas around being ‘well read’ in relation to LCC’s distinct disciplinary discourses. We evaluate the project’s success in progressing this work in partnership with students and with sufficient focus on race, as per the sector recommendations.

Project Methodology

The LTC pilot project involved four undergraduate courses in 2018 and five undergraduate and one postgraduate course in 2019. Each participating course formed a project team comprising up to three student participants who were awarded a stipend of £200 for their participation, an Academic Support Librarian aligned to that course, and either the Course Leader or other nominated academic from the course team. The project prompted partnerships for liberating curricula via selected reading lists from each participating course. This operated through six phases:

- Phase 1 Project meeting to agree auditing framework parameters, terms and timelines
- Phase 2 Student participants audit unit level reading lists as agreed by project team
- Phase 3 Project meeting to discuss audit findings and identify area or topics for liberation
- Phase 4 Project team to explore alternative sources that have been identified as needed
- Phase 5 Project meeting to agree reimagined reading lists
- Phase 6 Revised reading lists published

The project aimed to survey the representation of authors in reading lists from underrepresented groups, and to initiate a broader discussion around the Liberate the Curriculum agenda by:

- Bringing together students and key colleagues from course teams and libraries
- Contributing to and building on work to address attainment differentials including the LCC Still Waiting project
- Evaluating the function, purpose and importance of reading lists
- Exploring methodologies to create inclusive and/or non-binary course content

The project took a dialogic approach to reflect on learning resources recommended on courses, the impact they have on the engagement, attainment and sense of belonging of students historically ‘othered’ within the arts academy. As Charles (2019) explains:

The issue for students who are other (BAME, LGBTQ, etc.) is that they come to university to learn about a subject they are interested in and look to the academic to be the expert on this: very much the power dynamics that they encounter in middle and high school and that they are familiar with. What happens when they become aware of a lack of visibility of plural voices, or of people like them as having contributed to the subject, or who might have a different narrative to the ‘story’ being told?

Through its six phases, the project took an iterative solution-based approach to liberating reading lists, including face-to-face meetings to support the staff and student co-creation of frameworks for auditing and reimagining them. At the first meeting, an auditing approach from the London School of Economics' Student Union was offered to participants as a baseline example; this consists of an excel spreadsheet for recording the gender and ethnicity of authors. Before receiving this, participants worked in their project teams to complete a quick exercise to geographically place the authors of four example texts on a world map, using means and methods of their choice in the time allowed. This was intended to elicit some of the problematics in reviewing 'texts' and their authors regarding geographic and national origin, ethnicity, and other personal information that is seldom made public. Under the UK's 2010 Equality Act (GOV.UK 2013) personal characteristics such as ethnicity, gender and sexuality are protected and people have the right for this information to remain confidential, partly as a means of preventing bias and discrimination.

That being said, the project's first task of auditing reading lists required information about authors' personal characteristics, so an approach to finding this was still needed. The previously mentioned Still Waiting Group took a visual approach based on physical signifiers of an author's ethnicity and gender, as recognised from public facing photographic portraits. Visual identification was one way in which LTC project participants identified authors in the first exercise, in addition to looking up authors' biographies and cross referencing to the location of the publisher. It was essential to raise these practical issues in the first meeting to develop confidence in identifying authors in an effort to increase the visibility of those underrepresented. This discussion also raised the issue of the need to evaluate the diversity of sources in terms of content, as well as in relation to the authors' identity. In these ways the exercise proved effective and had the secondary benefit of breaking the ice for the newly formed project teams. For the rest of the first meeting participants took time to select a unit reading list from their course and to start co-developing methods and frameworks for auditing and reimagining these in time for the second project meeting. The second and third meetings provided further opportunities for participants to reflect on and co-develop methods for review, in relation to their work in progress and initiatives at other UAL colleges. Teams were asked to share their completed audits and reimagined reading lists online as well as in person at the meetings, and at the final meeting they were asked to verbally feedback on their experience of the project and complete a short online survey, providing valuable insights that have informed our evaluation.

Project Evaluation

The project is evaluated qualitatively against its own liberation aims of challenging hegemonic conceptions of knowledge reflected in reading lists, and against the recommendations of NUS and Universities UK (2019) regarding students as partners and a focus on race in curriculum review.

Increasing The Diversity of Reading Lists

The project's first aim was to survey the representation of authors in reading lists from underrepresented groups. A quantitative evaluation of this aim could be attempted by identifying the proportional increase of underrepresented authors on the reading list and judging the degree to which liberation has been achieved against the percentile increases demanded by the Arts Student Union. Or it could be measured by the increased representation on reimagined reading lists compared to the demographics of the course recommending them and/or the demographics of the college, university, local or national population. Whilst our evaluation does point to some material changes to reading lists, the main focus is on what was discovered through the project in terms of participant engagement with and increased understanding of the complex process of decolonising reading lists.

It should first be stated that this engagement was varied and not all project teams completed the work of auditing and reimagining a reading list over the two years of the pilot project. Over the two-year pilot ten courses participated: six of these completed a reading list audit at varying scales and levels of thoroughness; six presented a reimagined list or equivalent; only four of these completed both an audited and reimagined reading list, and these four outcomes were similarly varied and too inconsistent to count as valid quantitative measures.

For three of these courses the results were not comparable in quantitative terms as the reimagining resulted in different kinds of proposals for the courses to gain broader, critical and culturally diverse understanding of the discipline; not intending to replace the selected reading list, but instead offering a way of informing all reading lists for the course. A student and librarian from another project team produced a reading list audit and a reimagined list intended to replace the selected unit reading list, including a very long list of other authors that could be included, a significant number of whom would be classified as non-white if the list were to be audited again for ethnicity. This would appear to be a step towards increasing representation of underrepresented authors, but it has proved difficult to determine whether these recommendations have been taken on board by the course due to lack of engagement by academic members of the project team. Whilst this was a disappointing outcome in terms of change made to the selected reading lists, this particular case has highlighted factors for successful partnership working, which we will explore in relation to the project's second aim.

Collaboration and Student Partnership

The second aim of the project was to bring students and colleagues together. One initial challenge in doing this was recruiting students to the project; despite them being offered a financial reward, a surprising lack of students came forward and those that did were not always able to engage with the project meetings or self-directed tasks due to other commitments. This was the same for the academic staff involved, struggling to find time for additional curriculum enhancement activities outside existing course management demands. The librarians were committed to the project, but their engagement was affected by unexpected staffing changes. Such challenges are to be expected in any project operating outside of the daily business of studying, teaching and library services, and flexibility appeared to allow some project teams to still progress with some aspects of the work even if they could not attend meetings. This did however compromise the more in-depth dialogic intention of the project meetings, dialogue being a fundamental aspect of defining the curriculum, as explained by Duna Sabri (Sabri 2019, p.24) in 'Decolonising the Arts Curriculum Zine 2':

Conversations between tutors and students are the most interesting because it's there that the curriculum is enforced. We think about it as being in reading lists or in the examples that tutors give students or in the references. But actually, I think it's in those conversations that we lay down the boundaries of the curriculum.

Clare Warner explains in the same zine that "decolonisation cannot happen [...] if hierarchies of power exist in the classrooms/course teams/leadership teams/meetings/public spaces in the university" (Warner 2019, p.58). The LTC project challenged such hierarchies by paying students to work in partnership with academics, but this relied on more than just financial incentive, as one student participant suggested in the LTC feedback survey:

Although the teacher and student relationship shouldn't be one way and we can always learn from each other, should academics hold the main responsibility for ensuring reading lists are diverse and that they are engaging with the diversity of approaches within their own discipline? Where should the responsibility lie?

Healey, Flint and Harrington (2014) explore such issues in great detail, including the “differential commitments to partnership learning and working (ethical issues of responsibility and accountability)” (Healey, Flint & Harrington 2014, p.46) which are pointed to in this participant’s feedback. They also include a model for students as change agents (Fig. 1) which helps us to understand the role students can play in the work of curriculum liberation and decolonisation. The LTC project enabled students to play a role in curriculum development, and be part of decisions being made at course level with course leaders, tutors and librarians, drawing upon their experience and different forms of expertise, which relates to the description in the bottom left of the model.

Figure 4.5: A model for students as change agents (source: Dunne and Zandstra 2011, p. 17)

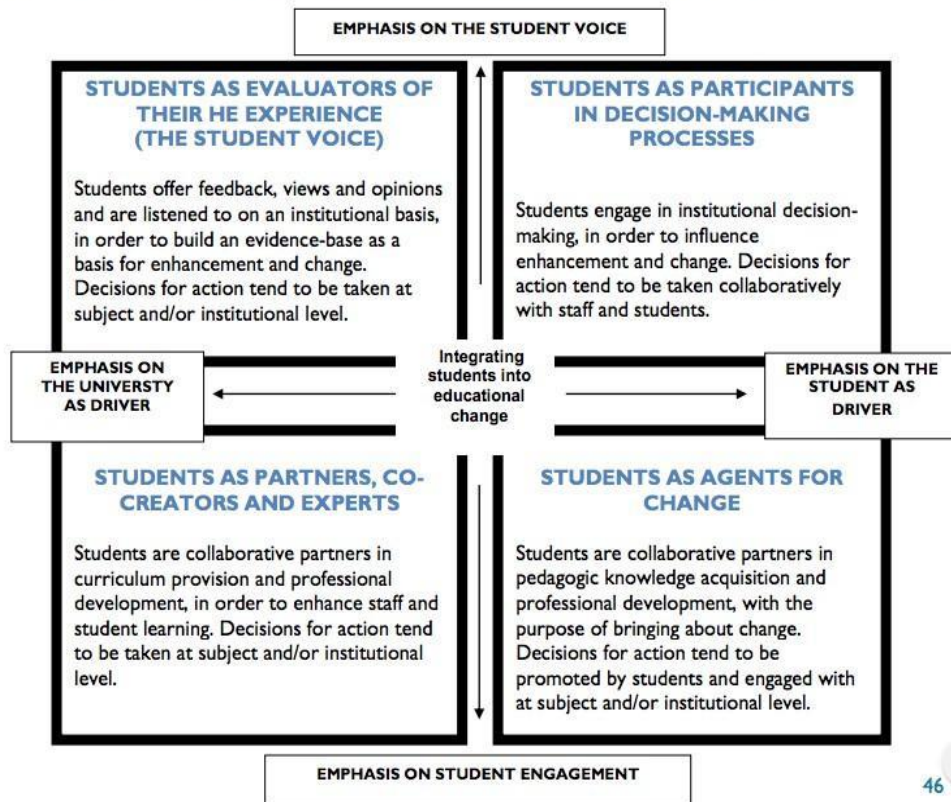


Figure 1. A model for students as change agents (Dunne & Zandstra 2011, cited in Healey, Flint & Harrington 2014, p.46)

Students engaged with this opportunity in different ways according to their distinct identities, political views, motivations, and position within the college. Some were also experienced Course

Representatives, seemingly more confident in raising issues with their course, although not always helping to find solutions. Some seemed to want to show how much work they could do in auditing and finding sources, but not necessarily in ways that could be seen as liberated or decolonised, raising questions about student preparedness: At what stage in their studies are students equipped with sufficient disciplinary knowledge and critical thinking skills to be able to effectively judge, question and propose sources for a discipline's liberation or decolonisation? Healey, Flint & Harrington (2014, p.33) explain how it "takes time for 'new-comers' to move from being peripheral to full members of the community" and engage in such activity, which highlights further questions around partnering with students for curriculum review: Do they need to fully know the curricula and its real-world application before taking part in its transformation? And with such power dynamics at play in current students critiquing the products of their own assessors whilst also trying to get their work done, might alumni be better positioned for such work?

In an article exploring staff-student partnerships, Cook-Sather (Cook-Sather 2014, p.187) explains how "crossing that threshold can be initially 'troublesome', given the norms in higher education that clearly distinguish faculty and student roles and responsibilities". She goes on to reassure us by saying that, "once embraced, the notion of such student-faculty partnership is transformative, irreversible, and integrative" and in her experience:

participants experienced and created brave spaces - spaces in which they felt courageous enough to risk, explore, experiment, assert, learn, and change, knowing that they would be supported in those necessarily destabilizing and unpredictable processes.

Feedback from students participating in LTC indicated that most felt supported and courageous in the space created. One student said "it was interesting to be part of discussions with different courses about the need to diversify reading lists, and to hear student voices about their experiences and ideas in this area". Another highlighted the benefits of partnering with students across courses: "the interaction with students from other courses opened my mind up to several other ways and uses of reading lists, and also the different needs of each course, which in turn inspired us to think differently of our units as well." Such feedback provides reassurance in terms of the collaborative process in undertaking such work, and valuable guidance in developing future partnership models for curriculum review and development.

Examining Race as a Standalone Issue

What is left to examine is the extent to which the project focused on race as a standalone issue, distinct from other equality and liberation agendas, and assisted in exposing covert and institutionalized methods that maintain the Whiteness of the curriculum. As mentioned before, some participants in the LTC project appeared to be reproducing the western canon, and in the previously mentioned Central Saint Martins' initiative, international students from non-western regions also appeared to do this, as they demonstrated higher regard for white, western canonical texts in their reconstructed reading lists. As explained in the methodology, there are various problems in the way that authors and their work are identified in terms of race. Student participants highlighted this in their feedback, noting the challenges they faced in researching an author's identity and finding relevant sources from racially diverse authors.

The relationship between identity and knowledge production is complex, and whilst reading list audits at UAL and other institutions reveal the lack of authors of colour and female authors, simply

adding more of these authors to a list is not in itself enough to constitute a curriculum's liberation or decolonisation. This issue is discussed by Matthews in relation to her role in decolonising curricula as an academic at a South African university. Matthews refers to epistemological ethnocentrism or "the difficult question of the extent to which knowledge reflects the position and experience of the person producing the knowledge" (Matthews 2018, p.53), and she outlines two divergent positions: on the one hand that identity determines knowledge production, and the other that knowledge can be objective and neutral, and goes on to propose (Matthews 2018, p.55) that:

I would like to defend here a more complex response that recognizes that experience and social context impact upon knowledge production, but that does not present knowledge as simply an expression of our position and experience in the world.

Matthews also suggests practical strategies in the classroom for introducing multiple perspectives and voices, which include discussion of the contested nature of knowledge with students, proscribing marginal texts alongside more mainstream readings, and adding short biographies and photographs of authors to reading lists, all of which the LTC project also discussed.

That being said, the contributions that people of colour have made to art and design disciplines continue to be undervalued and underrepresented in reading materials published and listed in curricula, which is both an aim of and barrier to the work of curricula liberation and decolonisation. Figures from UK Advance HE reveal that in 2016-17, out of c19,000 professors, 25 black women were recorded as holding this position. More than 14,000 white men were recorded as professors, while just 90 black men held positions of the same status (Advance HE 2018). The academy plays a vital role in making such contributions visible and increasing the representation of BAME academic staff and researchers to in-turn improve representation in mainstream publishing, nationally and internationally. As noted by El Kadi (2019):

Scholars based in the global North are widely perceived to produce knowledge of 'better quality', and they benefit from powerful networks and means to disseminate their research. Meanwhile, authors based in the global South are often marginalised from academic debates, and their research is less likely to figure on leading international peer-reviewed journals. The lack of publications from authors based in the South in top journals means that it is challenging for course conveners to draft geographically balanced reading lists.

Whilst the academy and publishing world pick up pace with this, it is important for the work of liberation and decolonisation to continue to simultaneously identify, validate and increase the visibility of sources outside of mainstream publishing as Charles (2019) suggests; understanding that counter-hegemonic perspectives are often represented in sources still deemed as non-academic. The Liberate the Curriculum project encouraged participants to interrogate what sources are considered as 'academic' and promoted the library's role in signposting to a broad range of sources representing culturally diverse perspectives. The project also challenged the traditional status given to reading over viewing or listening and questioned the basic function of the reading list, and the inevitable power relations inherent in the traditional model of production.

Conclusion

Our conclusion begins with a summary of the key learning points from the Liberate the Curriculum project. Using reading lists as the primary focus of the project meant that their purpose and value was helpfully examined, and even though many students ignore reading lists and some staff admit to not always prioritising them, the project found the reading list to be a useful starting point for discussing issues of representation in curricula and library collections. It found that more diverse representation can be achieved through the inclusion of a wider variety of sources, expanding what is deemed as ‘academic’ to podcasts, blogs, videos, zines and other media. It also found that the act of liberating curricula is not necessarily about replacing texts or increasing authors on individual reading lists, but rather an opportunity to reimagine how texts can work to reflect and amplify new narratives within the course.

The co-construction aspect of the project highlighted various challenges and opportunities related to the hierarchies between academics, librarians and students, and even between students at different levels. The meetings provided crucial support for this, although individual participants engaged with this differently. At best, the project meetings became liberated and even ‘brave spaces’; at worst they reinforced hierarchical power relations. Feedback from participants was however mainly positive with regards to the meeting space and opportunities the project offered them to be involved as partners in curriculum review. Particularly encouraging feedback came from two participating academics, emailing to thank us for running the project and explaining their main takeaways from it. One explained that they were not only liberating the selected unit but all units across the course, and said that “where it is harder to find key texts that come with a wider cultural perspective we can raise students' awareness of the issue”, confirmation of the project’s influence not only on course reading lists, but on course teams’ underpinning pedagogic approaches. The second academic explained that “the main impact will be next year, when we revalidate the course, and I anticipate impact throughout the course, not just in the unit that was audited”, course revalidation being a prime opportunity for systemic embedding of liberation and decolonisation.

We end by outlining the next steps for co-constructing liberated and decolonised curricula at LCC. Whilst the Liberate the Curriculum staff-student collaboration continues to deepen understanding of and develop methods for auditing and reimagining unit reading lists on courses across LCC, the project is simultaneously prompting and informing college and university wide curriculum developments. Curriculum liberation and decolonisation, in partnership with students and librarians, is being systematically embedded across the university via new course validation and revalidation processes, and courses with the widest attainment gaps will be working with a new tool for ‘Decolonising Reading Lists’ (UAL, 2020) co-created by the LTC project team and UAL’s Academic Enhancement Model team (UAL, 2020). The LTC project is informing college and university wide discussions and developments around the role of reading lists on essential course documents, with LCC moving in the direction of removing them entirely to instead promote more dynamic and inclusive platforms for sharing references within a discipline, such as ‘The Edit’ at Wimbledon College of Arts.

The LTC project is also informing work to develop academic and pedagogic practice more generally, developing understanding of the role that partnership plays in creating the kinds of curriculum and educational experiences needed for our diverse student communities. This includes work to interrogate the role of the academic as gatekeeper of the curriculum or guardian of the canon, and the value of co-construction and partnership with students, librarians and other members of the

community as an essential part of the higher educational experience. UAL librarians will continue looking critically at their own practices and share their liberation and decolonisation initiatives with colleagues in the sector through platforms such as LIS Decolonise JISCMail. Academic staff, librarians and students at LCC will be involved in developing the Liberate the Curriculum initiative and create further opportunities for students to co-construct curricula, learning from University College London's 'Student ChangeMakers' (2019) and other such initiatives across the sector. The evaluation and impact assessment of this work will hopefully contribute to the university's Action and Participation Plan for the UK Government's Office for Students (2019), as we consider quantifiable measures for understanding how reading list liberation and decolonisation approaches are improving the satisfaction and attainment of our international students and students of colour.

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