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5

WHAT CAN DECOLONISATION OF CURRICULUM TELL US ABOUT INCLUSIVE ASSESSMENT?

Sarah Lambert, Johanna Funk, and Taskeen Adam

Introduction

One of the strengths of an inclusive approach to education is that all students benefit. It's not just about accommodating and improving education for students with diverse abilities and cultures. Inclusive education that models respectful and productive relationships between students with diverse knowledges, cultures, histories, and identities also shows majority or privileged students the strength and contribution made by those with different backgrounds.

From the perspective of cultural inclusion, inclusive assessment as a sub-set of inclusive education can aim to: provide justice for Indigenous, international and students from minority cultural backgrounds; and cultivate in all students an understanding of the need for cultural justice and the value of multiple cultural knowledge perspectives. Inclusive assessment – particularly if part of inclusive curriculum – has the potential to provide all students with greater graduate outcomes than assessment that draws on only the Western canon of ideas. The idea is that all students should graduate with multiple kinds of knowledges and leave better prepared to negotiate different worldviews and cultures in their lives.

However, this vision for inclusive education and assessment has not yet generally arrived in practice. Higher Education tends to consider students who are not from White, English-speaking middle-class backgrounds as “disadvantaged”, less-capable students who lack the “cultural capital” needed to navigate university terminology and processes. Students from Indigenous, international, or migrant backgrounds are often considered doubly disadvantaged for having to study in a second or third language and for being first in family to go to university.

Our work has been informed by theories of social justice and decolonisation which reject these narratives of underperformance for the way they focus on

what a student lacks (i.e., “proper English”) instead of the abilities they possess such as learning across multiple languages and cultures. Focussing on lacks rather than embracing diverse motivations for study is known as “deficit discourse” and higher education is awash with it (Burke 2012). The problem of deficit discourse is that it leads us to want to mould students who are not like us to be more like us. Our assessments and their grading criteria often ask students to think like us, speak like us, and write like us (where the majority of “us” in Western higher education are White) and be rewarded with good marks and university success.

Students may accept, reject, or mediate the need to assimilate to succeed. One mediating response is the contemporary cultural practice of “code-switching”. Code-switching is where students who speak different forms of English such as Black English, Aboriginal English, or African-American Vernacular English to learn to switch between their local English and the English required of them at university and beyond. A similar process happens when it comes to writing in English too. Code-switching requires additional cognitive effort but it does allow students to move between two similar but distinctly separate worlds. Rather than making an effort to incorporate the actual English of millions of students into Western education, the sub-text of our learning outcomes is clear: we do not recognise your own English as legitimate, work harder to change.

In addition to our previous understanding of higher education as exclusionary to working-class students’ values and language (O’Shea 2016), current approaches to students from different cultural-linguistic backgrounds can be seen as contemporary expressions of racist White assimilationist or White Supremacist policies (Baker-Bell 2020). But what are the alternatives? Social justice and decolonial approaches are an alternative that we explore for assessment for inclusion in the next section before introducing a *Culturally Inclusive Assessment* model developed from a range of empirical and theoretical sources.

Rethinking assessment as social justice and decolonisation

Social justice principles such as *recognitive* and *representational justice* (Fraser et al. 2004) provide a more inclusive narrative and way to relate to students from different socio-cultural backgrounds. Social justice principles focus on recognition of and respect for students’ strengths, abilities and cultural knowledges – sometimes known as a “strengths-based approach”.

In the context of higher education curriculum and assessment, we can think of *recognitive justice* as ensuring students can see diversity in the examples and resources provided to scaffold learning and assessment. *Representative justice* is about ensuring students can hear and take on board diverse points of view and knowledges in what is taught and assessed. It assumes there is knowledge and expertise in every language and culture, and seeks to avoid dominance of one over the other.

Social justice principles can help us identify and address under-representation and misrepresentation in curriculum, knowledge, and assessment. Under-representation is where socio-cultural diversity of authors and ideas are absent.

Misrecognition is where students' cultural differences are represented in negative or stereotyped ways (Burke 2012).

Decolonial theories address “sexual, political, epistemic, economic, spiritual, linguistic and racial forms of domination and exploitation” that developed during periods of White colonial rule (Grosfoguel 2007, 217), and that are still present even after political emancipation. For example, the need to decolonise higher education in South Africa is as pressing now as ever, even though technically the rule of “apartheid” has been over for many years. In Australia, the “White Australia” policy is long gone but its insistence on White ways of knowing casts a long shadow on higher education even today.

With regard to assessment practices, decoloniality sheds light on the geopolitics of knowledge production which questions who determines what counts as knowledge. Knowledges produced in North America and Europe tend to be considered more authoritative than knowledge produced elsewhere. This is known as “epistemic hegemony” and it relates to how endogenous and indigenous knowledges have also been pushed to “the barbarian margins of society” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015, 490).

Diversifying what is taught and assessed can help overcome negative stereotypes surrounding those who are seen to be different – particularly Indigenous people, people of different religious beliefs and people of colour as well as women in certain roles and fields. It is important to reduce the marginalisation and trauma that students feel when confronted with education and assessment systems which reinforce racist assumptions and stereotypes about them and their abilities that they already suffer from society on a day-to-day basis. It is important to note that not all differences are visible. So, in the current context of higher education, recognitive and *representational justice* is also a priority to increase the inclusion and success of LGBTQI+ students and those with invisible disabilities whose are present in increasing numbers, even if they are not seen.

Indigenous theorising of education for and with Indigenous students is a particular example of decolonisation of education that also underpins our work. Framing education as a “both ways” model (Yunupingu 1989) between Indigenous Australians and communities – also now known as “two-ways” (Harris 1990) – provides opportunities to enrich and reframe Indigenous and Western learning as complementary. In doing so, the strengths of Indigenous communities and traditional knowledge is acknowledged, helping to overcome deficit discourses and misrepresentation which are still unfortunately all too common.

Framing learning as “two-way” also helps to overcome the tensions between global and local knowledges. The interviewees in Lambert and Fadel’s (2022) study debated the extent that particular topics needed more culturally diverse authors, citations, readings, knowledges and ideas. Some wanted a more “Australian” textbook, others preferred a more “global” approach to learning materials and assessment examples. The developing consensus was that both the local and global knowledge and examples were critical to include, and that colonial narratives should not be normalised or centred.

While two-way learning has developed to describe learning between Indigenous/local and settler/Western cultures, its ethos can be used to frame the bridging between a range of cultural knowledges and contexts. For example, in Australian Universities with Asian campuses, “two-way” learning can also be valuable to foster an approach of learning from each other. This might be expressed by allowing students to negotiate assessment topics, examples, and literature relevance across both Western and Asian knowledge bases.

Building on theorisations by Jansen (2017), Adam similarly found that a decolonised education can involve “situating one’s culture at the centre of one’s learning while still drawing on other cultures” (Adam 2020a, 200), or it can be taken even further to be “learning about all cultures and their entanglements” (ibid). Indigenous and Eastern scholars (Bates et al. 2009; Bhabha 2004) have critiqued the idea of “traditional knowledge” as some kind of pure cultural knowledge that was static pre-colonisation. In the contemporary world, ideas are fluid – our knowledges are tangled together with ideas moving from Indigenous to coloniser, settler to Indigenous, east to west and west to east. From the knowledge-as-entanglement point of view, no one region is the sole authority. The role of the educator can be as a facilitator of two-ways learning that encourages students to recognise the benefit of their own cultural knowledges, and new/additional cultural knowledges.

To avoid further marginalising minority students, we need to ensure that we don’t reject their cultural beliefs and “other ways of being, thinking and rationalising” (Gonzalez 2011, 7) in the way we grade and provide feedback on their assessments. Nor do we need to accept them wholly without question. We can model critical questioning across multiple knowledges by drawing on different cultural ideas and frameworks to discuss and analyse topics in our lectures and tutorial discussions and even to challenge the ideas put forth by the educator. At the post-graduate level, we can support our students to critique and weave new knowledge from multiple cultural knowledge sources. We can also respect multi-cultural students’ differing identities and motivations for study (see Stephens et al. 2012 relating to communal vs individualistic reasons for studying) by designing assignments that give students the choice to do a project or research in partnership with their community. We can also frame any discussions about the rationale and benefits of our assignments in terms of both helping individuals get jobs as well as a broader benefit to the community.

We can also learn to take an inclusive stance on the kinds of global Englishes our students speak, and to mark their written and spoken assessments on the strength of their ideas and ability to demonstrate the learning outcomes, and not for how much their syntax and descriptive language habits match our own (for more on Habits of White Language (HOWL), see Inoue 2021). Institutions on a path to decolonisation could also reflect on whether it is time to allow students to submit assignments in Indigenous and other official languages, such as the case in some institutions in South Africa (Mbamalu 2018).

In Adam’s (2020a) study students interviewed reflected on how colonial and apartheid legacies have affected their educational experiences and identities

through inferior quality of education, forced languages, forgotten histories and incongruent values, cultural norms and practices. Assessment is implicated in each of these issues. Students' views ranged from: wanting to learn and be assessed on local knowledges in their local languages (Africanisation); wanting to centre their learning and assessments on their own cultural history topics relevant to their daily lives (Afro-centrism); and wanting to learn and be assessed about all cultures and their entanglements equally (knowledge as entanglement).

Adams also spoke to MOOC designers who strove towards decolonising their MOOCs. She found they used three approaches: *justice-as-content* where reading lists and curriculum was diverse and decolonised; *justice-as-process* where co-creation and a plurality of thought were actively sought in the design of the course and its content; and *justice-as-pedagogy* where students were encouraged to critically engage, reflect on, and even challenge what was being taught (Adam 2020b; Freire 1970). These approaches could be taken up by educators in many colonial/settler contexts and they underpin the *Culturally Inclusive Assessment* model that we describe with further examples in the next section of this chapter.

Culturally Inclusive Assessment model

We have identified some common themes across our decolonisation work which we have drawn together to develop a *Culturally Inclusive Assessment* model. The themes map across the *justice-as-content*, *justice-as-process* and *justice-as-pedagogy* dimensions (after Adam 2020b), as shown in Table 5.1. The following section discusses each dimension in detail and provides additional examples.

Within the *justice-as-content* dimension, a content diversification approach is taken replacing Western case studies and other examples used in assessment with

TABLE 5.1 Culturally Inclusive Assessment model

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Common themes</i>
<i>Justice-as-content</i> : decolonising what is taught.	Removing deficit discourse from learning materials, texts, discussions, assessment examples and feedback. Correcting under-representation or misrepresentation.
<i>Justice-as-process</i> : decolonising education processes; a plurality of thought is designed into the course curriculum, assessment, and content	Two-way learning; relational processes; personal positioning and critical consciousness; student co-creation of decolonised learning materials as an assessment task.
<i>Justice-as-pedagogy</i> : students are encouraged to critically engage, reflect on, and even challenge what is being taught; assessments or whole subjects designed to teach the ideas of socio-cultural justice, decolonisation or cultural competence.	Modelling and scaffolding critical thinking and reading skills to challenge deficit discourses and power difference; learning how to apply socio-cultural justice, diversification and decolonisation to new experiences and contexts.

Source: Adapted from Adam (2020b).

local/Indigenous/Asian examples or those more relevant to students' context. While this is not without some risk of romanticisation of the local (Jansen 2017), it allows for marginalised knowledges to be reclaimed.

The *justice-as-content* dimension also emphasises overcoming deficit language which describes students as “underperforming” or lacking knowledge or “cultural capital”. Deficit language is commonplace and hard to shift. Therefore, it may need to be the focus of some assessment items, which students “read” as more important than lectures and other activities. Related literature suggests that assessment is needed to support unlearning of deficit, sexist, racist and colonial ideas and assumptions of the world and the field the student expects to graduate into (Cross 2003; Mize and Glover 2021). One approach is the use of a structured “deconstruction assessment” (Sjoberg and McDermott 2016) where early phase medical students undertake a class discussion and a reflective assignment addressing a set of anonymous questions about race and health issues. The assignment reveals and addresses a wide range of misrepresentations and assumptions which would be undesirable to carry through to their medical practice.

From this we can see that there is some overlap in the model's dimensions – it would be hard to design an assessment for unlearning racist and colonial ideas (*justice-as-pedagogy*) without first addressing deficit language (*justice-as-content*).

While staff in Lambert and Fadel's (2022) study said they used lectures or tutorials to counter outdated and sometimes racist language and ideas found in textbooks, they also acknowledged that students relied on these same textbooks to write their assignments, which then might carry outdated ideas and deficit discourses with them. To ensure alignment between what is said and read it would be necessary to regularly review and revise lists of essential readings recommended to students to complete their assignments (*justice-as-content*). An idea to take this further would be to offer students a simple process such as a web-form to allow them to provide feedback comments on outdated or racist sections of texts and to suggest new texts from a wider cultural perspective (*justice-as-process*).

Another approach used to respond to colonialist knowledge in an outdated textbook was to invite students to update it (*justice-as-process*). An assessment option was provided to students to convert their final written assessment into a chapter of a new textbook to be used by future cohorts (Funk 2021). To support the assessment, students were guided in critical reading and two-way learning (*justice-as-pedagogy*), which was also modelled in the discussions (*justice-as-process*). Decolonised thinking in the form of the students' book chapters were provided by students with both Indigenous and settler identities and the class modelled how to position themselves with humility (*justice-as-pedagogy*).

Since the assessment required students to produce an analysis of a cultural event in recent social media, the examples incorporated into the new textbook were both culturally diverse and very current.

The *justice-as-process* dimension recognises that diversifying and decolonising learning and assessment can and must address more than the surface level

symptoms of colonialist thinking and euro-centric content in assessment and curriculum content. The *justice-as-process* dimension is personal and relational no matter whether we are teaching on-site or online. There is an emphasis on centring learners and their cultural backgrounds within formative and summative assessment conversations and processes.

For example, the MOOC designers in Adam's study (2020b) and the RPL process in Funk's work (2021)-centred relationships (between learners/participants and communities) within assessment processes so that feedback is located within the context of trusting and open practices. Participants are taught how to "position themselves" by acknowledging their cultural position and power differentials associated with their roles. Trust emerges from the development of a "critical consciousness" which is when one takes a conscious stance to investigate one's positionality in the world in relation to others (Freire 1970).

The *justice-as-process* dimension is underpinned or framed by two-way and complementary learning between multiple knowledge traditions. For example, two-way learning can also be extended to recognition of prior learning (RPL) between institutions and Indigenous communities – a form of decolonising access to higher education credit.

Funk (2021) was involved in the development of RPL processes with students' deep on-Country knowledge and community leadership roles in mind. For those outside Australia, being and doing "on Country" refers to identities, relationships and practices between Indigenous people and their land that shifts from region to region. RPL processes allowed for a contextualised demonstration of cultural knowledge and skills such as exhibiting awareness of power relationships and cultural norms in a work setting. These skills enabled students to gain credit for these learning outcomes in a mandatory first-year cultural studies unit. Prior qualifications and work experience related to the cultural studies subject also counted towards the RPL credit gained. A student working "on-Country" as an Aboriginal liaison officer could, for example, submit work produced in their employ that showcases their ability to work in a "two-ways" capacity. One recent student and Indigenous business owner developed three of his own papers on Indigenous Business perspectives into an open book chapter (Wickey 2022). These RPL records lodged in an institutional electronic portfolio begin to populate institutional digital platforms with examples of more diverse cultural knowledges. Such records can be read by other staff and students and in turn provide more examples of assessment equivalence for students from a range of cultural backgrounds. Wickey (2022) also used these papers as a basis for cultural orientations to new non-Indigenous work colleagues and the "open" nature of the book chapter allows wider uptake within a wide range of educational and other institutions due to the lack of login or payment needed to access the book.

Wickey's commitment to his own development alongside his commitment to sharing Indigenous knowledge with non-Indigenous business leaders and workers remind us that Indigenous and international students are experts at cultural

“code-switching”, as they’ve been living in two-worlds for all their lives. It is more the case that Universities have been slow to accept their responsibilities for two-way learning or “bridging the socio-cultural divide” (Devlin 2013; O’Shea 2016) as a process of reconciliation between Western and non-Western, working- and middle-class modes of thinking, being and doing at university.

Funk’s work also highlights that the students being taught may already be leaders in their own communities, so it is not helpful for teachers to position themselves as always more knowledgeable than students in student-teacher relationships. Educators can choose to position themselves as leaders in one area, while deferring to students’ leadership, authority and experience in other areas. The complementary nature of both educators and students’ cultural knowledges can be made explicit in class and assessment conversations, and the benefit to the class of the collective knowledges shared. This development of “critical consciousness” as a process of “mutual humanisation” can take place for both teacher and learner, coloniser and settler – as a two-way approach in situ and online (Freire 1970).

The *justice-as-pedagogy* dimension extends the decolonised processes to the explicit teaching of socio-cultural justice as the focus for whole assessments or even whole subjects. The focus is on teaching critical thinking and reading skills attuned to cultural power differentials. This is often an interdisciplinary exercise. For example, an assessment on Indigenous nursing within a series of assessments or a whole unit on culturally inclusive nursing, teaching, business, or environmental management. If students can learn to critically read cultural situations and exchanges, they will be empowered to apply it to a host of new situations in their life, future studies, and careers.

Opportunities in assessment for inclusion

Although we have provided some ideas and examples in the previous section, different disciplines, year levels and cultural contexts usually require something more tailored. Using the *Culturally Inclusive Assessment* model as a framework, the following questions can be used to diversity and/or decolonise assessment in one’s own context through consideration of content, process and pedagogy.

Justice-as-content opportunities

- Whose cultural knowledges are the focus of assessment questions; is there a rationale for this? How might students use more diversified cultural examples or options?
- Whose knowledges and perspectives might be missing from reading lists and assessment resources? To what extent are, for example, women and authors of colour cited in practical examples and theoretical frameworks?
- How frequently do staff review essential and assessment related readings and examples to weed out deficit language which might unintentionally reinforce exclusionary stereotypes? Libraries and/or teaching and Learning

centres can contribute to this. Institutional Inclusive language guides may be available. If key readings are historic and use what is now considered inappropriate terminology, students need to know what has changed and why the older reference is still useful.

- Whose knowledge is legitimate to be included and cited by students? How will new authors be evaluated?
- How will deficit discourse be re-storied in the ways that feedback information is provided without speaking on behalf of those from other cultural backgrounds?
- What digital resources of cultural leadership can students be referred to, to allow leaders of colour to be represented in assessments?

Justice-as-process opportunities

- How can assessments be designed to allow students to situate their culture at the centre of their learning, while still recognising and appreciating other cultures?
- How can students be supported to develop skills in learning about all cultures and their entanglements within particular fields of study?
- How might students' high impact contributions to their socio-cultural communities be recognised as knowledge in pre-admission assessments of students' capability?
- How can a recognition of prior learning approach be brought into classroom conversations to recognise students' existing cultural knowledge within examples and assessment conversations?
- How can two-way learning and dialogue be modelled rather than one-way "inputs" provided in feedback and assessment?

Justice-as-pedagogy opportunities

- How can assessments that foster "unlearning" be introduced in early classes to explicitly address students' pre-existing assumptions and language of difference as a foundational learning activity for the discipline?
- In upper-level classes, how can students be engaged in a process of addressing under- and misrepresentation in curriculum materials by assessing the research and development of newly decolonised learning materials?
- How and when can students be scaffolded to critically read new material, including materials they source as part of assessment work, to avoid reinforcing stereotypes or misrepresentations in the field?
- What kinds of assessment items could be modified to include reflections or measures of students' development of critical consciousness from the beginning of their learning journey?
- When should questions be added to course feedback surveys asking students how assessments could be more inclusive?

While the main aim of this chapter has been to focus on diversifying and decolonising learning and assessment, it is important to recognise that the broader educational landscape is founded on many colonial logics. Drawing on Bali (2018, 305), “[a]ttempts at inclusion can only be authentic and meaningful when we make the content, process, and outcome of education more egalitarian, open, and inclusive”. Decolonising assessment practices will be more effective when coupled with decolonising content and curriculum, embracing critical pedagogy and praxis, diversifying staff, encouraging interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary collaboration, questioning academic processes that determine what counts as knowledge and what doesn’t, and questioning power structures within our institutions. These diverse angles on knowledge practices can offer justice as content, process, and pedagogy at the level of the institution, which can better lead to more just and inclusive assessment.

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