

Transcript: Decolonising the Arts Curriculum: Perspectives in Higher Education – the story behind the Zines

This podcast tells the story of the two Zines on Decolonising the Arts Curriculum, co-produced by staff and students from UAL and the Arts Student Union. Both Zines make space for the expression of different perspectives and experiences of decolonisation, through a wide variety of media, from the literary to the visual. Narrated by Anita Waithira Israel, Lucy Panesar and Rahul Patel.

Welcome to Interrogating Spaces. A podcast that examines ideas around inclusivity and attainment in higher education. We speak with staff, students and practitioners to explore questions around democratic and decolonised teaching practices. In this episode of Interrogating Spaces, we look at the second Decolonising the Arts Curriculum Zine. We speak with the organisers of the Zine project to understand a little about its background, hopes and aspirations, as well as speaking to contributors and audience members at the Zine 2 launch event.

So in front of us are two copies of the Zines, they are called Decolonising The Arts Curriculum: Perspectives in Higher Education Zine 1 and Zine 2, which was printed couple of weeks ago.

Yeah I've got the Zine with me actually. So let me have a look. There was a page...I'm going to find it. Page 86. It's an anonymous account from a student, an international student at UAL. And yeah, it just it just spoke to me because I know how many students.. this is like their lived experience and to sort of have it on paper was just really powerful. Okay, so.

The piece is called Anonymous:

“The whole nine months of studying our curricula has not given us a global outlook or covered global industries. Everything is concentrated around knowledge systems, forms and content of industries in Europe and the US. If the world began and ended with Europe and the rest, that would be OK. What makes it even more problematic and regressive for me is that UAL has 60% international student body in my class alone. There are 18 students in my class and 14 of the 18 are international students. For the remaining four students, there are 2 EU students and 2 UK students and 2 out of the 4 are black. I feel like my experience as an international student at UAL doesn't matter. Black students do not seem to matter either. Curriculum that's important to us doesn't matter either. We're in the neo colonial curriculum and we are being asked only to reproduce Eurocentric views of media and communications.”

My name is Lucy Panesar and I'm currently the Progression and Attainment project manager at London College of Communication. Yeah, it was in my former role as Educational Developer in Diversity and Inclusion in the Teaching and Learning Exchange that I was in touch with the then Education Officer at the Arts Students

Union, Hansika Jethani and having conversations with her around the importance of kind of decolonisation movement at this time as a kind of discourse that could help us in or guide us or give us insights in the work that we're trying to do to address certain racial inequalities like the BME attainment gap. So I was having conversations with her and I was also teaching on the PG Cert, which is how I met Rahul Patel, whose PG Cert project was also on the importance of decolonisation and what do people make of that as a concept? He did some really valuable work around what senior management make of that as a concept.

Rahul Patel gives his overview of the Zine project:

The feeling among students and a number of staff was, we cannot carry on with what we have been doing for the last few decades. Students and staff have been dissatisfied with a deeply embedded enlightenment project, Eurocentric Western centric, that there is only one knowledge system and others are either not worth talking about, not worth having a dialogue with and not worth integrating into a daily teaching and learning process. I believe the students' movement across the world starting out in South Africa then ending up here in the UK demolished that. We said that we want to be part of a teaching and learning process which takes into account the total historical knowledge that are at hands of human beings, and we've been denied that by a particular hierarchy. People who want to have and continue a particular privilege, through their own method that they have, through colonisation, through imperialism, through a capitalist power system which has dominated arts, education for an incredibly long period of time. This collaboration came because we started to go.. three of us started to go to a lot of meetings where this issue was discussed. Not only decolonisation, but also the attainment gap where students of colour, black and Asian students, politically black I would that's the term I would use, compared to white students, white home students, came in with the same grades and left with worse grades than white home students. It's called the attainment gap and at UAL until a couple of years ago it was 21%. In some courses it was a lot, lot higher. And now it's 18% because of the intervention through various discussions around breaking down that attainment gap.

And it's been quite interesting as that was a couple of years ago now, and at that time there was a lot of...people were quite dubious about whether that was the kind of an appropriate term for, us or discourse for us to be following as an institution. And people were concerned about it being alienating you, know just by saying decolonising, it sounds quite kind of violent, like you want to get rid of something you know, shake things up in quite a revolutionary way. So there was kind of, quite a lot of initial concerns, so just going ahead directly with some kind of 'how to' guide on how to decolonise didn't feel appropriate. It felt like we needed to first give space to people in the broader sense, to the people of the academic community, students, staff of any level. to share with us what that means to them. And that includes, you know, even if they wanted to contest it like 'we don't like that term'. So we put this open call out for Zine 1, to just see what responses we would get - and it was such a fascinating, compelling.. like.. series of responses in a whole range of different media that we.. you know we had to include everything, so that we could represent such a diverse range of views on this topic.

My name is Anita Waithira Israel. I am the previous Education Officer and also previous UAL governor. I was a student at LCC. I studied photojournalism, yeah, and also I'm one of the co-creators of the second Zine. So I sort of got involved in the decolonising the curriculum scene stuff when I was student. Because I remember sort of asking questions like why is my curriculum white? Why what can I do about it? Where can I find out more information about – just find more resources on my heritage basically and that's when I sort of met Hansika. And she urged me to get involved in the Decolonising the Curriculum Zine stuff that was happening. I didn't submit any work for it, but then obviously later on I ran to be Education Officer and then as when I started the role, I realised how important that Zine was and how necessary it is for other people to know about that Zine and to just continue on the work. So when Rahul and Lucy approached me about doing the second Zine, I was absolutely like, I want to push this work as far as it can go and also use my platform to share other people's work. So you know we have entries from students from staff, and yeah, it's just important that those voices are heard and recognised.

And it was this idea that we need to create a narration which is accessible, which is not extremely academic, extremely inaccessible, and extremely geared towards a particular academy which has no relevance to what is taking place in the classroom. And therefore we decided to get both student and staff voices to talk about the issue of decolonisation in their subject field in an arts university. Whether it be design. Whether it be fashion. Whether it be fine art. Whether it be ceramics. Zine 1 came out of that, and the story started since its publication. Part 2, the second Zine is the story of the interventions as a result of that. I believe that the two Zines need to be used together. And they will provide a very successful method of approach which opens up the whole notion of decolonisation in practice.

The first Zine did end up attracting a lot of student content. The second one is more staff that were encouraged and I think the staff have felt encouraged by the 1st Zine. I think they were probably quite nervous to put anything into the first Zine. Around, you know.. who am I to comment on this topic, especially staff who are not of colour. White staff I think felt quite nervous about wanting to enter into a discussion on this topic. So I was quite.. I was personally quite happy to see that in Zine 2, white colleagues are speaking to their own identity in relationship with this topic. And I think it's really yeah an important part of this. Otherwise it doesn't.. there's also that there is a danger that it's only for certain ethnic groups that get to talk about like this topic, and then that kind of perpetuates the idea that is still the burden of students and academics of colour to undo the thing that they.. that oppresses them. You know. But I think this kind of collaboration element of this where it's kind of all members of the community commenting on what is essentially our shared history and our shared current situation, of living in this multicultural society, and in institution that is so diverse.

I must say this. this is not about us, those of us who are involved in the curation, the editing, putting it together. It's the submissions that make the Zines and that collaboration. Although the submitters haven't talked to each other, but it is a collaboration, I believe that has produced a significant piece of document which will have its role in this arts university.

Hello, I'm Silke Lange, I'm Associate Dean for Learning, Teaching and Enhancement at Central Martins. And I was one of the contributors to Zine number 2, the Decolonising the Curriculum Zine. And I felt really inspired after reading the first version of the Zine and felt that I would like to contribute to it. What I really value about the Zine is that it gives space to people to voice their views around these issues that affect attainment. And of course what we really need is of course the data on attainment is important, but actually these are the real stories of people that have been captured here and this is what we need to hear. And this we need to listen to these stories and they will pave the way forward for the institution.

And I think one thing that happens within institutions is that, they like to censor a lot of the work, even though that this is an arts institution, a lot of work that's controversial or extremely honest around subjects like racism, it's censored and it's sort of, dulled down so that it is pleasing to other people. But what the Zine does is it takes all these authentic experiences and puts...it has a platform for it basically. And it's not just about the experiences, it's about the work as well, the art. And I said even the Zine itself, like the fact that it's kind of made out of newspaper, newsprint. It feels so much more radical. It's not shiny, it's not glossy, it's just, you know, it's in its purest form, which I thought was fantastic. And with Rahul as well. I remember when we first started, he was like, no, we're just gonna take. We're not gonna axe anyone out either. We're going to take all the contributions, which is why it's much longer than the second Zine because we took all of the submissions and it was open for everybody.

But that keeps that idea that it's not peer reviewed, it's not heavily..it's not really edited at all. You know that that the pieces appear as the authors wish them to be, providing they're not completely offensive! You know that they are..yeah, what our community believe and how they wish to express. Because some of them are more expressive than others in terms of like visual expression it's not, more abstract views on on the topic. I think that's really important part of that for our community.

I'd say sort of what made me feel like it was an important project to get involved in was the fact that I had lived through being a black student at UAL, and I remember being so ecstatic to be at UAL and not realising the hurdles I was going to come up against. And you slowly sort of comes this realisation by third year that all this stuff has happened and you're surrounded by systemic racism and the erasure of black academics and black curriculum. It's not there, and it's not apparent, so I knew that it was important because when I got into my role, I started to have black students coming to me with the same problems that I was experiencing, and I was like, you know, like, The first Zine was such a fantastic resource, but it only reached a certain amount of people and I was like we need to push this out, which is what we did through the series of events and the workshops and stuff that came out of the first Zine. And then in the second Zine you sort of see, it's a different in the way that contributors are sort of responding with a sort of confidence about what they're talking about, because it's almost like the first Zine was an introduction and in the second Zine is a kind of realisation, so that's why it was important to me, because I didn't want other students to have to experience what I was experiencing.

And the new Zine has just got so much more rich content, and I feel like it's really advancing the discourse. Moving definitely from what it means to decolonise the curriculum, which is essentially our kind of course content, the material substance of what we learn, to the kind of..institution itself, the practices and cultures of an arts academy. I think the second Zine definitely speaks a lot to that and how arts academy is situated more broadly in in culture and society.

I do want to say that actually a Zine also has a role to play, not only in terms of the curriculum. The curriculum is not just the reading, it's not what takes place within the classroom. It is the institution itself. For me that's the curriculum from top down to the bottom. It is how the library service works. It's how the bookshop works. How the shop works. How, what is the atmosphere in the canteen? How does the students union work. How does the total university work. For me that is the curriculum, and I think this Zine kind of promulgates that in some way or the other, that the curriculum is not just one or two bits on the reading list - that is not going to make the change. It's that total institution.

First and foremost, universities have to start listening to their students. This Zine tells.. it's basically a letter to the university asking for change, and I think that they need to, you know.. I don't know if they've read the Zine, for example, but that's one thing; and being in touch with what students need and what students want I think is really important. But I think as well just putting more funding and resource into things like this, you know this work's now been done. UAL has it very easy. All they have to do is still come up with a way to, you know, make this a priority like get this out into classrooms and start using this as a as a sort of platform to sort of push off other initiatives that can sort of come out of the Zine. Whether it's workshops, exhibitions, even if it's just an artist directory with, you know a list of you know, artists and resources that's available to students so that... There's so so much that I could say about it, and I think the Zine is sort of been a gateway and a platform for students to connect with staff. And I think creating more of these platforms would be really beneficial.

The way I see that this second Zine is going to proceed is that is going to be embedded in course teams and course teams will get a chance to look at it, to engage with it, to criticise it, to affirm it, to then produce something else from it. Zine 1 did that, Zine 1 completely opened up the library spaces, produced exhibitions, produced an engagement that we just talked about. It produced a sense that we are part of a movement which we want to be engaged with. So library staff felt that they want to be part of this new movement which is challenging the old notions of how things have continued for such a long time. And you know the walls need to be brought down, and this is part of the engagement. So it's not just the library staff, we know in every course across the University and has had some impact of the other in some form or other. If the tutors or the lectures haven't picked up the baton, the students have within those courses and it's worked vice versa as well, and the students themselves are felt inspired that their tutors have.. are running with it as well. So I have discussions literally everyday with everyone about how much these two documents are needed and will needs to happen with that.

In January 2020, and events held at Chelsea College of Arts to celebrate the launch of Zine 2.

Today we had a Decolonisation of the Arts Curriculum Zine launch event and we had a couple of readings from the Zine.

I think it was a really intriguing and interesting evening with everybody sharing their ideas and I think it's important anyway for change and it's sort about everyone's participation to make that change because we can't do it on our own. So this is the beginning of new exciting things and I ask anyone to read these things and they should be just go through in terms of not just in terms of UAL. There should also be outside of UAL. Whatever other places can catch up and learn. It's important. I'll be taking it with me actually out into schools. And see what their response is.

Angela Drisdale-Gordon, Head of the Further Education Office, an employee for 25 years at UAL, started off the speeches.

Now, it's wonderful in terms of the Zine, how it's just enabled I think some of us to just sort of really kind of own the issue. I obviously in terms of my career here I sort of know that I suffered in the sense that, you know, for a long time this has been an issue that has is not new. As I keep saying, it's not you, it's something that we've had debates about that hasn't felt as if it's gone anywhere. But I do feel now, but the University is in a position where I can really see tangential change. I think we're ready. I think we're ready because we have to be. We can no longer go on with awarding gaps that there are, and we can no longer, you know, we can no longer stop sort of ensuring that all of our students or student bodies get a fair crack of the whip right, or have opportunity to really excel at their best. So. I think there's a backdrop of really hideous stuff going on out there, and I think it's our responsibility to ensure that we're constantly calling that out, but I would make a plea in terms of the University is to just ensure that everybody understands the context of what we're talking about. This should be, I think, part of the references for all of our courses I feel, as well as I think the resources of Shades of Noir. But I ultimately do feel that we all in some sort of way have to make some contribution by ensuring that we own the issue. We admit when things are not working, but we try and make sure that in terms of our systems, our culture that we just move in direction of ensuring that all of our students achieve the best that they possibly can. Alright, thank you.

And amongst many other speakers we hear from Doctor Clare Warner, Educational developer within the AEM and Attainment team:

So I had the privilege of working with Rahul and Anita and Hanskia on the scene and I think we established quite unorthodox ways of working which is, midnight phone calls and things of that nature, but I think that's for me what's going to make it really, really memorable? Of all the things I do with UAL, I will remember it because it was unorthodox and it was messy, but I'm really proud that actually our commitment to the work was always much greater than whatever differences of opinion we had or our own individual egos. So we were really united in our commitments for the work, and I think that there's a message in that for all of us who are committed to these issues. I've been at the University for just over 10 months and when I first joined the first thing that struck me was what long history of anti racist work there is at this

University. So I want to pick up on what Angela said that we can't frame this. We can't afford to frame this as a new movement. As I think, there's always the risk that when institutions get hold of agendas and when agendas migrate from the margins to the centre is danger that they get co-opted, and that those kinds of kind of activism that people of colour have been involved in gets erased and the institutions over right their own narratives around equality and diversity. So I think we really need to think about how we have gotten to this point. So as has been said the contributor is really make the Zine what the Zine is it's the gift of the stories that you've given us. And I think it's such a powerful collection of voices which are going to be critical in moving us forward and enhancing our kind of collective understanding of structural inequality. So for me, this agenda is about much more than reading lists, it's really about dismantling the structural inequality, which create and sustain racial hierarchies which are so prevalent in our society and then, which in turn are mirrored within our institutions.

Ok so my name is Jheni Arboine and currently my role at UAL is as Academic Enhancement Model Senior Lecturer. Well, it's been really emotional evening looking at the second Zine of Decolonisation and hearing from different speakers talking about their perspectives on the Zine. I think it's been quite humbling to see white staff say something. Because we're so used to black staff, black academics, academics of colour, saying their bit, but to have a white member of staff, Silke in particular, talking, you know that you have actual authentic allies, and that makes the journey so much better.

Carole Morrison is Senior Lecturer within the AEM and Attainment team at UAL: Just that the evening is made it even clearer how kind of emotional and challenging some of the issues are and the fact that people need to sort of consider the impact on not only the sort of psyches, but physicalities of remembering and well learning and hearing about this stuff and its impact on other people like. So if you suddenly understand and recognise the impact on different communities of you know histories of behaviour and histories of actions, and it suddenly brings it home to you. And then you you react to it in quite an emotional way. And then you share that emotionality. It actually means something, it is really important to share the impact of like having your eyes opened. You know it's like it's like the Matrix, isn't it? When you take the pill, you know and you can't unsee what you have now seen. So I for me this evening is really been about that, you know. The senior management talking about that and sort of sharing the emotionality of this agenda is really important. It's a really important thing to acknowledge that it's hard work. It's mental, emotional, and physical work this. And that's going to make it harder. But if people at the top and at all levels of the University do that work and acknowledge that that is what is happening for me when I'm talking about these issues, then I think we have a chance do you know what I mean.

Going back to the title of what the Zine actually says is Decolonising the arts curriculum, and I think that that in itself needs to happen. Yeah it's a Zine, it's a platform, it's a resource. But the fundamental reason why it exists is because students didn't feel like they could challenge the curriculum and they didn't feel like the curriculum was challenging them and it lacks inclusivity. And like I said before, it's selective. So I think that although this is a great piece of work and we can talk

about it as a piece of work, we have to kind of go back to the message and go back to the reason why it exists and that is because we need to decolonise arts education.

I just think this is such an important time to be doing this work. And it's and it can be seen as 'do institutions co-opt the idea of decolonising'. And there's a lot of fear around that. That it's kind of using it as a tokenistic term, as kind of diversity and inclusion..like a tick box exercise - but I dunno, I think this particular piece of work with the Zine, I think it's evidence that is happening a bit more authentically and you know, in a lot of ways, I think, and it just gives. I think it's just so important to give the time and space for people to think about these topics and to reflect - because it's not something you can just like through overnight, just radically transform everything. It is kind of evolution, you know. So I think, yeah, I think these kind of materials - just having them around in an accessible format - doesn't look too threatening - can help to promote that eventual evolution, to what it is that we I think we hope you know a decolonised curriculum might look like and feel like for us.

I thought at first, Zine 1 would have a fairly short life, shelf-life. And it hasn't. It's still continuing. People want it together with Zine 2 as well. Zine was 64 pages. This is 96 pages with well over 70 contributors, so it's a super thank you to all the people who submitted. I mean there are so many exciting pieces in the Zine. It is difficult over an audio to kind of provide what it is, but the imagery that people have produced, whether in text form or in a visual form, in terms of illustrations, in terms of photographs in terms of drawings, in terms of sketches, has really produced something that I believe a large group of staff and students want to be part of.

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