

## Supporting the decolonization of university learning and teaching: practicalities, practices, and possibilities

**Book review: Tran, D. (2021) *Decolonizing university teaching and learning: an entry model for grappling with its complexities*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.**

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This book will be of interest to learning developers because it draws together and thematises existing scholarship on decolonizing learning and teaching, and provides a framework for conversations with colleagues to support learning and teaching practice which meaningfully probes how key decisions are made and relationships are built. This book creates a justification for its work as both a recognition of the decolonizing work that has gone before (p.ix), and as an antidote to apprehension around decolonizing university teaching (p.x). In asserting it is not 'to be read as a handbook for decolonizing learning and teaching [DLT]' (p.x) but rather to 'highlight the benefits of DLT' (p.166), the book makes it apparent that for DLT to happen effectively people need to be attuned to the need for, and the benefits and complexity of, the enterprise. Such a text then becomes a necessary precondition for meaningful DLT. In its very framing it challenges lack of progress in the HE sector (p.75) and it sees itself as scaffolding the dialogue and debate that will generate further knowledge.

The book builds this scaffolding in a number of ways. Firstly, at every turn the value of decolonizing university teaching and learning is documented: from supporting professional development to help staff think differently; to working more closely with students and eliciting and valuing their contributions; to thinking differently about using technology, assessment, and language; and finally recognising unconscious bias. Secondly, throughout the book, the complexity of 'decolonizing' is explored across formal teaching as

well as the informal and hidden curriculum (Cotton, Winter and Bailey, 2013). Particularly striking here are BAME students' perceptions of belonging and validation in their surroundings, the impact of the interest shown in them and their integration into their schools and programmes, and the power they discovered by engaging in and shaping extra-curricular activity (e.g., Carty's and Fairnington's contributions). Thirdly, the text is careful to situate DLT historically and socio-culturally and draws on contributions from different institutions and from colleagues and students across a range of disciplines, in academic and professional services contexts. Finally, the text brings these various strands together through the TRAAC model as a holistic framework through which to develop DLT.

The TRAAC model is introduced around a third of the way through the book, as a reflective framework to prompt consideration of teaching approach, relationship, activity, and assessment and content. The model is presented with reflective questions for each element to initiate discussion, and prompt consideration of how decolonization might occur in specific learning and teaching contexts. The framework focuses on the essence of how teaching and learning materials are developed (i.e., how the content, activities and assessments include and give voice to learners), as well as the relational aspects of how teaching is experienced and how relationships are built. The framework is offered as an 'entry point' to 'challenging conversations' (p.50), furnishing learning developers with a good foundation for supporting a wide range of DLT practices. The reflective questions prompted further thoughts for me: 'How could your students contribute to content selection?', 'What assumptions do you hold about participation?', 'How can you build shared connections with your students?', 'How can you create a learning environment to empower your students?'

Some readers might find that the delay in introducing TRAAC softens the impact of the framework. However, I discerned this delay as a decentring move that resisted establishing a dominant authoritative framework as an organising principle, to focus instead on different people's experiences and views. Furthermore, the form of the book decentres singular authorship. Incorporating a number of contributions from different standpoints, the text is poly-vocal: another key move in unsettling entrenched Western notions of 'individualism' and monopolising 'authorship' (Heble, 2002). Because the contributors all discuss their personal engagements with TRAAC, some readers might find the book repetitive. Arguments are recycled, e.g., the 'essay' as a Western invention and the challenges of decolonizing Law assessments. However, this instils a sense of

authentic discussion across the text, with topics being returned to precisely because issues are still unresolved.

The book is divided into eight chapters, organised around key DLT themes. It logically walks the reader through different dimensions of understanding DLT, firstly recognising implicitly and explicitly colonised processes, histories, and ideologies within institutions 'not designed' to do DLT work (Chapter One). The 'path' to implementation and experimentation winds through how development could/should be meaningful in the light of DLT (specifically related to the PGCHE) (Chapter Two), exploring the TRAAC model (Chapter Three), considering practicalities around building a decolonized curriculum (such as including students, involving librarians in improving the discovery of marginalised non-traditional work) (Chapter Four), and undertaking 'active' and meaningful inclusion as part of DLT (Chapter Five). Supporting this are two chapters which highlight the impacts of unconscious bias in staff and student perceptions of 'belonging' (Chapter Six) and language and power dynamics in teaching (Chapter Seven). The latter, the shortest in the book, felt thin. There was the potential here to highlight student agency, and this chapter really missed the added perspective of a contributor. Finally, the text explores testimonials of how TRAAC has been implemented in different contexts (Chapter Eight).

The text's positionality is carefully considered and constructed in form and content. However, the possibilities of TRAAC are framed somewhat defensively, as a 'highlighting', 'rather than offering up solutions' (p.166). There is potential to push TRAAC further, without it necessarily becoming a fixed 'solution'. Concentrating on the curriculum rendered postgraduate research a blindspot. The framework might be extended so supervisors and doctoral students could use different aspects to consider how knowledge is being created through research and shaped through the research community. Integrating 'decolonization' into supervision and underscoring the significance of BAME access to postgraduate research felt particularly important in light of the book's evidence of the significant impact of the underrepresentation of academic role models on BAME students' continuation and progression, and of the BAME attainment gap at undergraduate level. The recent *Broken pipeline report* (Williams et al., 2019) highlighted exactly this: biases in UKRI assessment criteria around 'prior attainment' and 'research active institutions' unfairly disadvantage BAME students' access to funding, which further impacts on equity in academia and what and how research is done.

Overall, this book is valuable in a number of ways. It diligently integrates insights from a 'canon' of works on decolonizing the curriculum and from universities to develop a multifaceted approach to DLT. It provides evidence of the TRAAC models' success whilst providing a context for readers to consider what they might adopt for their own practice. The transdisciplinary, poly-vocal approach ensures its accessibility and relevance for university teachers and professional services colleagues who support decolonization initiatives. Reading this book prompted a number of insights that I will integrate into my own teaching and curriculum design. This is a text that doesn't want 'to be read as a handbook for decolonizing learning and teaching' (p.x), as something that can be formulaically and uncritically duplicated across contexts. Instead, this book gives a framework so readers can ask the right questions to devise their own models for practice.

## **References**

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