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Who gets to decolonize: A reflection on the importance of positionality in the decolonization of digital learning spaces and learning design.

Abstract

Decolonization as a term and concept gained prominence in the 20th century as new nations emerged from the cessation of the global colonial project which primarily saw European countries occupying different parts of the world. In modern times, interests in decolonization have taken different forms, particularly in learning design and digital learning spaces. In the digital space, researchers mainly suggest introducing indigenous perspectives and cultural lenses in the design of digital learning environments and the design of emerging technologies that embed indigenous perspectives (Nede, 2023). This reflexive essay discusses the importance of positionality in digital learning spaces and learning/instructional design. While acknowledging that existing approaches are critical, and often center marginalized groups or voices in decolonization, we also argue that the current landscape may resemble a free-for-all regarding who can engage in decolonization. We further contend that positionality and the implications of these positions need to be discussed more in the emerging literature on decolonizing digital learning spaces.

Keywords: Decolonization; Digital Learning Spaces; Learning Design; Indigenous perspectives; Positionality

Introduction

At the beginning of the 20th century, most of the world was colonized primarily by European countries, until the early 1990 when free nations became the majority. As more independent nations formed, so too did the concept of decolonization emerge, as a rejection of the colonial project. For example, in the work of Bastin and Benda (1968) and Mezerik (1964), one notices references to decolonization as an end to colonial occupation. Kwame Nkurumah (1964) also added the concept of consciencism, which was a recognition by the Ghanaian philosopher and

first president that the end of colonialism must be thought of in relation to a change in human consciousness.

While some may use the term decolonization and end of colonialism interchangeably, the two are not the same, although they do run parallel. The movement to end colonization is part of states seeking independence and often led by political leaders (e.g. Ahmadou Ahidjo of Cameroon, Sam Nujoma of Namibia, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, etc.). The other part of Decolonization however refers to intellectual pursuit, a sort of undoing the mental damage that colonial occupiers perpetuated on those they oppressed. The intellectual aspect of decolonization, we argue, align with what Njoki Nathani Wane (2006) calls the "Doing something" about the colonial past and present ranges from genocide and rewriting history to denying their existence, devaluing their knowledges, and debasing their cultural beliefs and practices. This has been done through – among other mechanisms – Western systems of education, texts, and literature, thereby making the business of education and knowledge production contested terrain" (p. 87).

Historians have traced responses to colonialism to the period after World War II, when citizens of ex-colonies overtly fought for their independence (Betts, 2016). The concept has evolved from being mainly a political phenomenon (Delavignette, 1977), and extended to include all aspects brought upon during colonization: politics, economy, culture, education, or psychology (Betts, 2016, Gardinier, 1967). As any concept, decolonization has ignited debates among scholars around the world. For instance, Tuck and Yang (2012) define decolonization as "the repatriation of Indigenous land and life; it is not a metaphor for other things we want to do to improve our societies and schools" (p.61). The authors argue that "the easy adoption of decolonizing discourse by educational advocacy and scholarship, evidenced by the increasing number of calls to "decolonize our schools," or use "decolonizing methods," or, "decolonize student thinking, turns

decolonization into a metaphor" (p.61). Decolonization for these authors should therefore not be about decentering colonial perspectives, social justice, research, or digital learning spaces. Indeed, this "metaphorization of decolonization makes possible a set of evasions, or "settler moves to innocence," [and] problematically attempts to reconcile settler guilt and complicity, and rescue settler futurity" (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p.61). However, Garba and Sorentino (2020) posit that centering decolonization to land return maintains anti-black assumptions and undermines the abolitionist movement in the United States. Curley et al. (2022) posit that focusing on the white settler as the generator and foundation for anti-black and anti-native perception of land and people show that Black abolition and decolonization are not opposite political projects. Speaking in relation to the Afrikan context, authors such as Heleta (2016) and Msila (2020) contend that decolonization is about addressing Western dominance and epistemic violence and centering Afrikan knowledges.

Still, the debate on decolonization has not prevented scholars from examining decolonization in education and digital learning spaces. Decolonization in education often refers to changing the language of instruction or the curriculum content (Uleanya et al., 2019). The overwhelming use of technologies to learn and teach in institutions of higher education also coincides with increasing calls for sovereignty, self-expression, and identity. As such discussions on digital learning spaces cannot ignore the question of decolonization. We define digital learning spaces here as online learning environments, or settings where digital technologies are used to facilitate or enhance learning (Thomas et al., 2019). The design of digital learning environments, that is, learning design or phases adopted to create learning experiences, follows processes or models that have emerged from an immense body of research (Arguel et al., 2019; Mayer, 2014). Though approaches to the decolonization of digital learning spaces and learning design are not yet

established, scholars have already called for embedding indigenous perspectives in the design of digital learning environments using critical reflection with the use of protocol (Neden, 2023). These scholars argue that embedding indigenous perspectives decolonizes the design of digital learning spaces when protocol practices are subjected to critical reflexive review to ensure integrity and promotion of decolonizing practices (Neden, 2023). Decolonization of digital learning spaces has also taken the form of collaborative design, which means co-designing these learning spaces with historically marginalized groups or individuals. This approach to decolonization centers on empowering these groups to select, embrace, and even adopt culturally appropriate technologies for digital learning (Koole et al., 2022). Holev (2020) goes a step further to argue for the decolonization of the tools or technologies used in the design of digital learning settings. However, limited studies have focused on positionality in the decolonization of digital learning spaces and learning design. This article aims to address the question of positionality and the importance of these positions in decolonization of digital learning spaces.

Positionality and decolonization of digital learning spaces

Positionality refers to "where one stands in relation to 'the other'" (Merriam et al., 2001, p. 411). Positionality has mostly been used in qualitative research to explain how a researcher can switch from being an insider to an outsider depending on space, and even time (Bayeck, 2022). In qualitative research, being an outsider means not having similarities with participants' cultural background, race, religion, or education; while an insider can identify with participants understudy (Bayeck, 2022; Bourke, 2014). We build on this understanding of positionality to explain that positionality in the context of decolonization speaks to the situatedness of the position of the individual or scholar who engages in the decolonization of digital learning environments and learning design. This position informs how scholars make sense of the world (Acevedo et al.,

2015), that is, make sense of decolonization. In other words, decolonizing will be interpreted differently by any scholar depending on their identity, and on where they positioned themselves and on how they are perceived in relation to decolonization (e.g., are they descendants of the former colonizers or the former colonized). Yet the term is often used as if it is something that has a common understanding. Borrowing from Qin (2016), we emphasize that positionality "is the practice…of delineating his or her own position in relation to [decolonization and colonization], with the implication that this position may influence [decolonization practices/approaches],…or the way in which it is interpreted." (p.1). Hence, positionality indicates the perspective from which an individual views the world, influenced by characteristics such as gender, race, class, as well as their relationship to powerful and privilege individuals/history (Trinidad, 2024). As Crosschild et al. (2021) explain, "positionality and power are inherent with all research studies" (p.9), that is, power and positionality are enterically related because of the power dynamics that usually exists between the researcher/expert and the participants in the study. For instance, there are positions of power, which refers to one's authority or ability to affect the actions of others (Crosschild et al., 2021). Positionality in the context of decolonization also brings us back to the question of power. Power meaning who historically has been in the position of dominion of power, and who has not. For instance, having a similar historical/racial background with the former colonizer may give a scholar insight into the processes of colonization. In this regard, the scholar is likely an insider, and in position of power because of their relation to the history of colonization or the group that colonized. However, when it comes to decolonization, the scholar is an outsider, which makes researchers who can identify with formerly colonized people insiders. Yet, with regards to power dynamics, these researchers can be viewed as not being in position of power because of their history of colonization. Still, power is not static, but shifts from one context or situation to another.

Hence, in the context of decolonization the scholar/participant with ties to formerly colonized groups (insider) is also likely to be in position of power given their understanding of this experience/history and their potential to shape what decolonization should mean. This does not mean that the insider and/or outsider cannot both speak to the issue of decolonization. Corbin Dwyer and Buckle (2009) state that:

> Holding membership in a group does not denote complete sameness within that group. Likewise, not being a member of a group does not denote complete difference. It seems paradoxical, then, that we would endorse binary alternatives that unduly narrow the range of understanding and experience. (p. 60)

However, recognizing one's power and position allows individuals to reflect on how their actions and meaning making may shape and affect others (Czerniawski, 2023), which leads them to use "an ethic of care" (Reich, 2021, p. 5). There is no doubt that it's almost impossible for a colonizer to fully understand the colonized experience. Engaging in reflexivity gets scholars to examine the power within and around the process of decolonization to understand the overall work of decolonizing digital learning spaces and learning design. Learning design or instructional design is a field whose modern history is specifically linked to the United States (Sweller, 2021). Hence, decolonization of learning design and digital learning spaces is likely to mean and look different for an American scholar compared to a Native American, Black, or Afrikan scholar. In other words, the focus and processes that each of these scholars will focus or put more emphasis on will probably differ. For this reason, we argue that decolonization in digital learning environments and learning design needs to consider positionality. Who gets to decolonize matters to "understand how knowledge and experience are situated, co-constructed, and historically and socially located" (Reich, 2021, p. 5).

We approach this work from the position of Afrikan scholars researching in both western and Afrikan context. For instance, the first author, Rebecca, grew up in Cameroon, a country that

spans the West and Central Afrikan landscape (Njung, 2019), and studied in the United States (Author, 2022). Cameroon is a bilingual country that was put under the mandate of two colonizing powers France and Great Britain in 1922 by the League of Nations after Germany, the first colonizer, lost world war I. France and Britain ruled the country as two separate entities (French Cameroon and British Cameroon) until independence in 1960 (Njung, 2019). This background combined with experiences of studying as well as researching in the United States and in Cameroon inform the positions from which the author engages with, make meaning of the world (Acevedo et al., 2015), and of decolonization in digital learning spaces. As a second author, I, Tutaleni, spend most of my time with one foot on the Afrikan continent in Namibia, the other on the North American continent in the USA and my arms are stretched out to the world and beyond. As such I am a comparativist, concerned not just with how "things" impact me and the immediate community in which I find myself, but believing that knowing how others do, view, and see things, significantly helps me better understand myself and the world in which I travel. I am continuously developing and (re)formulating myself and my identity. I take solace and guidance from the likes of Kwame Nkrumah in my empathic belief that "I am not African because I was born in Africa but because Africa was born in me." I am not merely where I was born, where I come from, my race, gender, or my educational qualifications. All those characteristics and many others form who I am and are a building block of the future me. Like Frantz Fanon, I believe that I am not a prisoner of my history, my origin or my abstract destination. I am but a traveler and "In the world through which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself. I am a part of Being to the degree that I go beyond it." I view digital spaces through the lens of multiplicity, which are imbued with power dynamics and are in need of scrutiny if they are to be representative and open to all.

Addressing positionality in the decolonization of the digital learning environment and learning design will provide richer information, broaden, and diversify approaches to decolonizing these spaces. We argue that the processes available or proposed today lack positionality and may end up becoming recolonization of the space and field scholars purposed to decolonize. While there is no one way to decolonize taking account of and laying bare one's positionality can is a first step. In other words, decolonization of the digital learning environment cannot simply be accomplished through abstract application of ensuring that readings, and videos reflect a diversity of voices, cultures, and perspectives. It should also include information on the person selecting the diverse content. Decolonization of the digital learning environment cannot simply provide for learners to reflect on their perspectives or being culturally sensitive to others. Instead, it must also involve clarity on how the individual values learner's perspective and their understanding of or value of the notion of culture.

Conclusion

In this essay, we discuss decolonization with regards to digital learning spaces and learning design. Recognizing the various meanings of decolonization and approaches some authors have taken to decolonize digital learning environments, we argue that scholars need to incorporate statements of positionality when addressing decolonization. Centering marginalized groups or voices in decolonization is a great step; however, knowing who engages in decolonization is critical if we want to expand the emerging literature on the decolonization of learning spaces. Without owning one's own positionality, it may be possible to inadvertently continue promoting the colonial narrative.

Acknowledgements

The authors want to thank peers who contributed to the birth of this reflection through conversation and conference presentations.

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