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Unmasking Colonial Practices in the Classroom While Teaching about Decoloniality: Part 2

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In a previous blog, I detailed some of the ways in which white students' practices of coloniality are manifested in the classroom through co-optation, silence, and resignation. Such praxes—often unconscious and subtle—must be unmasked, especially for those who consider themselves to be allies for justice with communities of color. Such learning is not limited to white students, however, as students of color witness how instructors address dynamics of privilege and oppression in their courses and, as a result, learn who can (or cannot) be trusted to sojourn with them through their educational experiences and beyond.

But how do instructors unmask such subtle, ingrained responses (also known as embedded resistances)? Wisdom gathered from decolonial scholars and teachers within theological education, engagement with materials on decolonial pedagogy, and attempts to incorporate specific practices within my courses have led me to some core insights. I offer these not as a step-by-step "how to," but with the hopes that they might inspire others to praxis unmasking coloniality and invite colleagues and students alike to share in this work.

- Give more attention and intention to the processes by which learners engage with one another in the course than to the content of the course itself. I realize that this might be blasphemous to some, so try to give equal attention and intention to both the *what* of course materials and the *how* of individuals' relations across identity, power, and difference. A few questions to think through include:
- What values are you explicitly and implicitly privileging in your courses? For example, if

academic rigor is a central value, what standards and signals do you incorporate to exemplify rigor and how might eurowestern colonial norms be privileged within these standards? How do students come to know and experience these values and how might white students experience them differently than students of color?

- How might you create a space that does not privilege the voices, perspectives, and participation of those for whom the academy was designed—namely, white (and male, heterosexual, wealthy, able-bodied) students? What commitments and modes of relating are you incorporating into the course design? What role do learners have in shaping these ways of relating, and what else is needed by you as the instructor to mitigate co-optation, silence, and resignation from white students?
- When you encounter particular actions or patterns by white students that are likely replicating or reinforcing colonial dynamics, consider the following:
- Ask neutral questions—ones that do not have opinions embedded—that invite individuals to dig deeper into their own stories, assumptions, and experiences.[1] This should be done with care and the intention to assist in students' learning, but also with a genuine desire for the instructor to learn more about what lies underneath said actions or articulations (because our own assumptions are equally worthy of investigation).
- Questions can also be accompanied by, or followed up with, personal observations. It has been helpful for me to use "I" statements that reference my own observations or feelings in terms of the impact of particular noticings. In these cases, I tread a careful line as someone with positional power in the pedagogical relationship but who is also a person of color impacted by colonial dynamics. At times, I name and reflect upon my own complicity and unexamined colonial actions as a woman whose ancestry includes white colonizers and who continues to benefit from a system that privileges lighter skin.
- If students are able to acknowledge colonial underpinnings within their own embedded resistances, invite and/or offer alternatives to such resistances in order to decolonially reframe and re-praxis. For example, with white students who rely upon silence to avoid saying "the wrong thing," I have asked them—along with others in the space—to imagine ways of participation beyond silence that encourage vulnerability and trust. In a virtual space, this has included the use of various art forms and nonverbal visual or auditory affirmations, as well as the usual verbal contributions to synchronous discussions. It helps if values of imperfection and leaning into tensions have been privileged in the course already to encourage actions beyond silence, as well as acknowledging that silence is necessary at times.

These insights reside at the water's edge of an ocean of practiced wisdom from educators who have been attentive to decolonial pedagogies for decades. As someone who is at the beginning of that journey, I know such learnings will only be shaped and tested with more time and experience and are subject to shifts based on context, timing, and a variety of other unique forces shaping each relational moment.

Depending upon what visual representation is conjured by the imagination when one thinks of unmasking, the act itself might be quite simple, a bit uncomfortable, or downright painful (especially if one is a fan of horror films like me). Unmasking assumes that there are layers

hidden beneath the mask that must be revealed in order for truth or healing to ensue. If we as teachers remain at the surface of course preparation and design by focusing on the attainment of intellectual knowledge, our students fail to encounter the depths of what they both desire and deserve as divinely breathed beings. Such failure clearly is not theirs; it is ours. White students, especially those with longings to cultivate communities of justice and equity in solidarity with their colleagues of color, deserve our reflective questions, our noticings, our own acknowledgments of complicity, and our personal discomforts with tension as co-learners. The irony of unmasking colonial practices in the classroom while teaching about decoloniality is not lost on me; but the truth of the matter is that colonial practices should be unmasked in *all* educational spaces and places.[2]

[1] Liz Lerman and John Bortsel, *Critique Is Creative: The Critical Response Process in Theory and Action* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2022).

[2] I am grateful to the following teachers and scholars who shared with generosity their wisdom, experiences, and best practices related to decolonial pedagogies: Cristian De La Rosa, Christine J. Hong, Willie James Jennings, HyeRan Kim-Cragg, and Melinda McGarrah Sharp.

https://wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2022/10/unmasking-colonial-practices-in-the-classroom-while-teaching-about-decoloniality-part-2/