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# The Problem With Decolonizing Curriculum

Faculty and professors don't care enough



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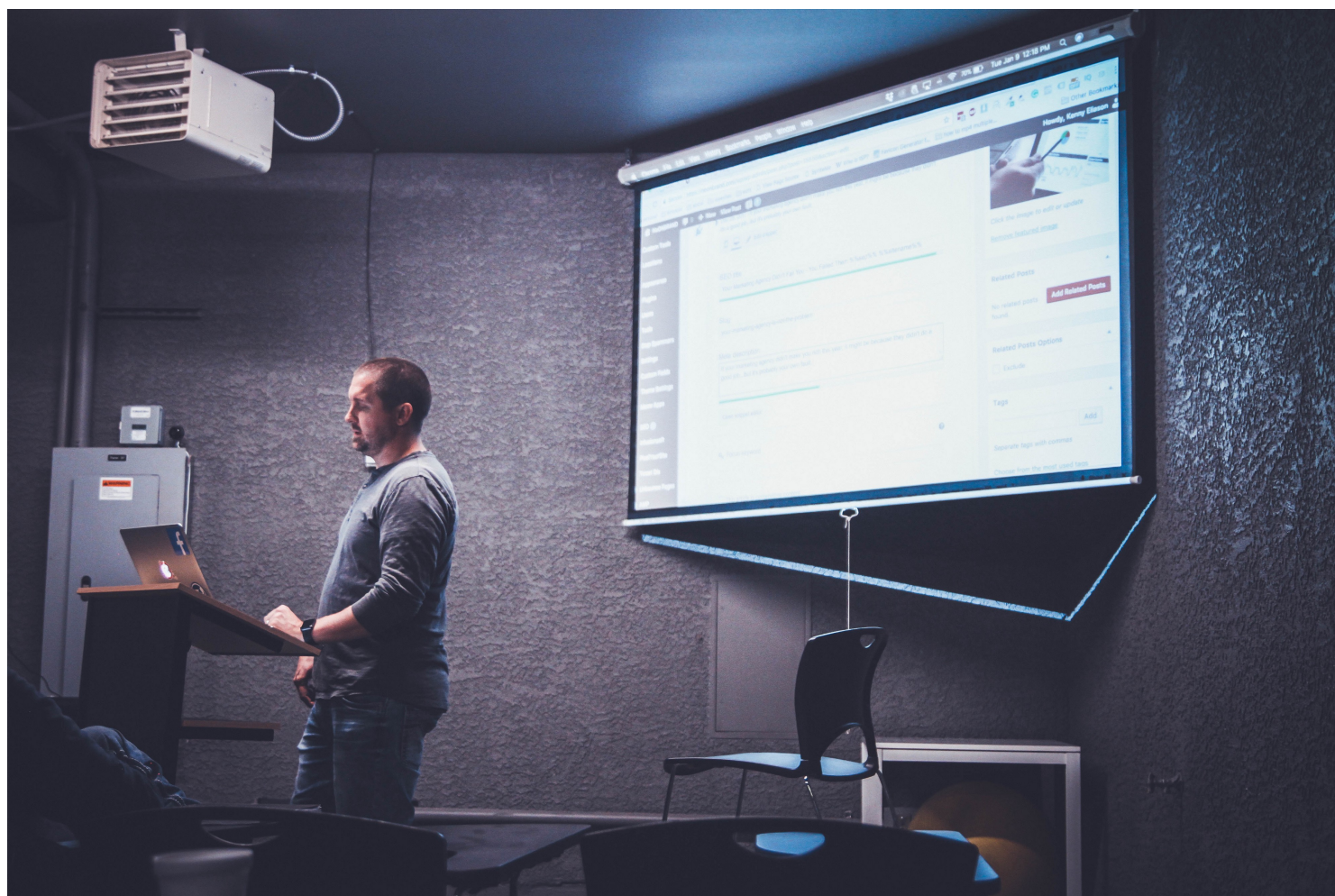


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This past semester, I was a research assistant at the University of Michigan. My task? Help one professor decolonize their syllabus and implement decolonial changes in the classroom. Each professor who volunteered to be part of the initiative was paired with two research assistants and agreed to certain deliverables (land acknowledgments, updated syllabus, etc.).

When I learned about the opportunity, I was beyond excited to impact readings and classroom practices. I had long been a student who would attend office hours just to give a professor suggestions on how to broaden their syllabus beyond old, white, European males. My enthusiasm was quickly met with a professor who had a hard time parting with decade-long beliefs and practices.

## What is decolonization in the classroom?

In America, from kindergarten to university you are largely taught material that represents the beliefs of white, wealthy men of European descent. The textbooks are written by these men and reinforce a dominant narrative of whiteness and coloniality.

You'll read F. Scott Fitzgerald's entire anthology before learning August Wilson and Langston Hughes exist. American genocide of Indigenous people will be relegated to a few paragraphs on the Trail of Tears and even those paragraphs will downplay the atrocities committed. Reagan's racist policies will be glossed over or entirely ignored but you'll learn an in-depth analysis of Reaganomics. Africa is simplified, so much so that Americans will refer to Africa as a country and not an incredibly diverse continent. Hell, even the widely-used Mercator world map is distorted to enlarge Europe and North America.

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*Decolonisation sensitises us to the existence of dominant discourses and the influence of dominant groups in what / who we research. It makes an appeal to be critical and reflexive throughout the research process. It provides a timely reminder that our assumptions about rationality derive from a literature that developed at a particular time and place.*

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Decolonization aims to reassess the narratives we teach and the voices we uplift. It looks at colonial histories and seeks to provide students with more legitimate and less

whitewashed histories. Decolonization practices solidarity and works towards redefining the classroom so that everyone can succeed, not just students who are more privileged.

## **Professors want to seem woke more than they want to evoke change**

By the end of my assignment, my research partner and I were convinced the professor we were working with volunteered to appease the school and BIPOC colleagues. At the end of the day, it seemed like they wanted an updated syllabus with a bonus woke diploma.

My partner and I came to our biweekly meeting with updated readings and suggestions for their syllabus. They came unprepared, uninterested, and dismissive.

We spent a whole hour talking about the importance of land acknowledgments or at the very least, the importance of learning about the indigenous community's land which the University of Michigan resides on. Their response? Well, they were from Canada and Canada did land acknowledgments years ago so it's a waste of time. Not to mention, Canada's wonderful track record with indigenous issues.

We brought up the controversial existing literature they had on their syllabus and our objections. We objected to having readings like "Tragedy of the Commons" on a syllabus with no context for Hardin's racist ideologies and fear-mongering. The professor objected that these were foundational texts and was hesitant to part with the readings, so we included critiques of the "foundational" work.

When we offered materials and suggestions to change classroom policies to reflect the diverse needs of students, more hesitation. I suggested an alternative assignment instead of a final paper because not every student can excel in that format. The professor seemed more concerned about their comfortability with grading than the evolution of academic social progress.

Not to mention, the professor did not read a single replacement reading we provided by the time our research assistant position was up. As much as I'd like to be optimistic, I do

not have confidence that our hard work towards decolonization will make it to the classroom.

## **Professors don't want to depart from their decade-long ideas**

Professors tend to be an egotistical group. Sometimes a fatal flaw, other times just annoying. But when it comes to decolonization, it is incredibly hard for professors to accept the material they have been teaching and spent their life working on have racist and colonial undertones. It's a hard bridge to cross for most and pride gets in the way of progress.

I led a conference late in 2020 about decolonization and a woman was sharing her research in Africa. When going through my presentation, she was visibly upset. During the Q&A portion of the event, she asked about intentions and since her intentions were wholesome, isn't that enough? I had to kindly but forcefully inform her that intentions matter little if her actions are hurting local communities for the benefit of scholarly knowledge.

So many universities are putting forth decolonizing initiatives but are not setting their professors up for success. Nor are they willing to reevaluate faculty who are hard-pressed to leave behind racist pedagogy and hire better professors. Universities want to say they have decolonizing initiatives without doing the work to make sure decolonization is implemented in the classroom.

## **Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) departments are stretched too thin**

In my opinion, for decolonizing to be successful, you need several layers of programs and implementation. The reality is DEI programs are often small, underfunded, and stretched too thin. Add on the fact that these departments and programs are going up against huge universities that are willing to change in theory, but rarely in practice.

Universities need mandatory seminars and workshops for professors about the need for decolonizing. They need to do their homework and have ramifications if they don't. *But what about their workload?* Universities need to pay staff and faculty to complete these programs. Sounds ridiculous? It's more ridiculous to continuously educate students with a foundation of colonial and racist ideology.

Universities need to rigorously assess curriculum and provide professors with the support to change syllabi. They then need to put in procedures so DEI initiatives don't die and actually get implemented throughout the school. Universities need to stop funding research projects that are colonial in nature. They need to understand decolonization isn't a publicity stunt.

DEI programs are limited without support and resources from universities.

Decolonizing curriculum can be a monumental step in the right direction, but not if it is performative in nature. Administration, faculty, and professors need to be on board to implement change. They cannot solely rely on students who are yelling for different curriculum or the one BIPOC professor who is already overworked. Universities need to do better for the future of education and for their students.

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