

Things and Time: reflections on teaching about race and racism on an undergraduate sport and popular culture module

Overview

This short commentary reflects on my delivery of a Level 6 module: Racism in Sport and Popular Culture. It represents some ruminations on my *ongoing* personal journey towards anti-racist and decolonial pedagogy: what Meleisa Ono-George (2019: 4) describes as teaching which ‘challenge[s] “exclusionary” education practices that promote, reinforce and reproduce dominant knowledges and the status quo’¹. I hope these considerations might, in turn, instigate dialogue with colleagues and students that can enhance *my* practice as well as others’.

The title of this piece, taken from the Wailing Souls’ 1974 track/riddim *Things and Time*, symbolises the module ethos of bringing our (lecturer’s and students’) popular cultural interests and passions into the classroom; it describes key thematics that underpin the learning content and approach: concepts (“things”) and temporal context (“time”); and it denotes the emphasis on elevating and valuing racialised voices (including those from outside the academy).

Things

‘Teaching practice is engaged, anti-racist and decolonial’, writes Ono-George (2019: 4), ‘if it forces students, especially those comfortably in the majority, out of their comfort zones’. Our module¹ begins by stressing the importance of *naming concepts* and *talking openly about problems* – for instance, racism, white supremacy, colonialism, empire – thus ‘re-situat[ing] these phenomena as key shaping forces of the contemporary world, in a context where their role has been systematically effaced from view’ (Bhambra *et al* 2018: 2). This forms the basis for a discussion on *all our* racialised experiences, opportunities, positions and privileges – not least in the fields of education and sport. This is routinely a challenging discussion, as some white students start from an unwillingness to acknowledge the benefits they accrue from a racist social structure or resist the focus on “them” rather than the racialised “Other”. Ultimately, however, their development is often edifying and enlightened.

Time

A central component of our module is thinking about temporal (as well as cultural) context. In the very first class we historicise (and problematize) the concept of race, exploring its emergence as “science” under colonialism and its connections to slavery. Next we challenge the dominant discourse that we are now “post-race” – i.e. in a period *after* race and racism – and establish racism’s structural, systemic contemporary manifestations. This also enables us to draw out connections between colonialism and modern sport (Burdsey 2018): such as the 2018 men’s football World Cup squads, the abusive use of Native Americans as team mascots, and discriminatory portrayals of Serena Williams.

Classes and assessment²

Fundamental to our module are matters of subjectivity, positionality and voice. I make it clear that as a white academic I simply have some knowledge of racism; but that it is learned/observed rather than experiential, and for that reason my teaching comprises purely one *form* and *source* of knowledge. Each week, the majority of module readings (which combine academic and popular sources) are from scholars of colour and/or women (albeit

primarily from the Global North). I explicitly explain their selection: both as excellent writing/analysis and as a subversion of a Eurocentric, white, canonical curriculum (Ono-George 2019). Our module also includes a “wild card” week, where students decide on the topics.

In a similar vein, we include different “live” voices and experiences in our class. This year, we were very happy to be able to have Dr. Scott Brooks (Arizona State University) and Dr. Jasmijn Rana (University of Leiden) present their work and facilitate discussion.³ We also visited the brilliant exhibition curated by Dr. Marlon Moncrieffe on black cycling champions, and engaged in the associated conference on race and education.

I am grateful to my dear friend and co-author, Dr. Stan Thangaraj (City College New York), for the idea behind the module assessment. Alongside an essay component, students submit a piece of creative representation (e.g. poems, posters, collages, playlists), enabling them to consider, analyse and resist racism in ways that are not constrained by conventional, institutionalised written techniques.⁴

Final thoughts

The magnitude of the “task at hand” (Shahzadi 2018) in tackling systemic racial inequality in higher education is apparent (Ahmed 2012, Arday and Mirza 2018, Bhopal 2017, Johnson 2018, Tate 2016). I am likewise cognisant of the dangers of claims of decoloniality that are merely metaphorical (Tuck and Wang 2012); and of how such assertions, through their incorporation into the neoliberal university, ~~they~~ can dilute radical politics (Sista Resista 2018). The impact of a single semester-long module in addressing any of these issues is, then, inexorably limited; but if we did no²t think that the classroom could initiate/develop a progressive politics among young people we would perhaps not have joined the academic world in the first place.

Notes

- ¹ While I am the only member of staff on this module, I use terms such as “our” and “we” here, rather than “my” and “me”, to emphasise an attempt to facilitate shared “ownership” of the module and flatten (where possible) power relations between the lecturer (me) and the students. Our module is about collaborative and shared learning: we all bring knowledge and experience to the classroom, and we all benefit from what happens in that space.
- ² Very useful practical advice can be found in, for example, Keval (2019) and Sista Resista (2018).
- ³ I am grateful to my colleague, Dr. Alex Channon, for helping to arrange Dr. Rana’s visit.
- ⁴ See, for example, the publically available YouTube playlist by Damon Harmon: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLiZrpJrX3qVtJuz7PS2nMqF8QoUn5o8lt>

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