

# Decolonizing and Deconstructing Education: Learning to Create Space

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To be a decolonized teacher means taking responsibility and actions towards dismantling coloniality in our classrooms.

It's important to recognize the relationship between modernity and coloniality and the way in which it has influenced our current educational system. Moreover, the creation of the "other" through occidentalism and orientalism demonstrates the lack of space given to non-Eurocentric knowledge. "Other" groups should be given space in our classrooms and we as educators have a vital role in recognizing the faults in the system and creating opportunity for marginalized groups—such as the Indigenous people of Canada—to share.

## Eurocentrism & Modernity

Modernity can be seen as a form of European identity that emerged in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> The concept of modernity and this European identity has contributed to the course of world history and continues to greatly impact society. "Over the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a universalized conception of civilized humanity developed that became the underlying

foundation for the formation of European identity and modern education."<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, European ideals have become ingrained in our systems and adopted globally. "Global—or universal—significance was claimed for European modernity from the very beginning."<sup>3</sup> These ideals include: Christianity, patriarchy, and civility. There are elements of western society that we do not question that derive from one of these three ideals.

For example, in general, the current school system continues to make its schedule in accordance to Christian holidays such as Easter or Christmas. European "superiority" has spread globally, particularly with the colonization of the Americas. North America, influenced by European ideals, has continued to perpetuate and impose the concepts of modernity. "Modernity is a European narrative that distorts and conceals its own cultural-historical origins as a new civilizational complex."<sup>4</sup> Therefore, we can see how modernity and coloniality have a close relationship.

Today, our classrooms, particularly in North America, are still impacted by this Eurocentric anchor of knowledge. Christianity, patriarchy, and civility remain ingrained in our systems and can only begin to be removed by first recognizing and acknowledging they even exist. Teachers must be mindful of influences. We must stop teaching from a Eurocentric perspective and expand our approach to include other anchors of knowledge—such as Indigenous knowledge, both local and global.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Baker, "Modernity/Coloniality and Eurocentric Education: Towards a Post-Occidental Self-Understanding of the Present," *Policy Futures in Education* 10, no. 1 (2012): 5.

<sup>2</sup> Baker, "Modernity/Coloniality and Eurocentric Education," 6.

<sup>3</sup> George Ritzer, *The Blackwell Companion to Globalization* (Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, 2007), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Baker, "Modernity/Coloniality and Eurocentric Education," 6.

## Coloniality

It is important to recognize the coloniality of our education system, particularly regarding our content and our Eurocentric knowledge base.

Coloniality refers to the control and power the dominant group has over societal systems and organizations, such as curriculum. Moreover, modernity and coloniality work simultaneously together. “Coloniality, in other words, is constitutive of modernity—there is no modernity without coloniality.”<sup>5</sup> From the arrival of the Europeans in North America, this coloniality, influence, and power spread.

Civilizing missions of modernity that began with the universal mission to Christianize the world demonstrates the modern/colonial relationship and the way in which world systems developed afterwards.<sup>6</sup> These relationships are often overlooked. This provides better insight as to why and how our education system is shaped the way it is today. By analyzing and understanding the history behind our systems and organizations, we as teachers can better deconstruct the coloniality of our classrooms.

Questions to consider when teaching include whether the curriculum and the method in which we teach stem from modernity/coloniality. If so, who does it benefit and more importantly, who does it hinder or harm? There can be no new development, growth, or inclusion of the “other” if we do not recognize the system we operate in and how our actions might in fact be perpetuating elements of coloniality.

Once we acknowledge the colonial system in which we exist, how do we go about getting out, breaking down, and moving towards an

alternative system? Moreover, what framework is—or will be—the new universal framework?

The problem may lie in that very question.

Perhaps we cannot exist in a universal, global system. Perhaps, systems should be more organic to the local. We as teachers can disrupt the modernity and coloniality in the current established Eurocentric system by focusing more on the local people and traditions rather than teaching foreign, imposed, and transported knowledge.

## Orientalism & Occidentalism

The concepts of orientalism and occidentalism were used as a way for Europeans to stand apart from those they considered “other.” It’s merely a construct to differentiate, for example, the western, “civilized” occident from the “uncivilized,” eastern orient.

“Occidentalism [is] Euro-American modernity’s conceptual/narrative imaginary for conceiving, interpreting, and managing the world order over the past 500 years.”<sup>7</sup> Orientalism was the study of exotic people, places, and culture. Europe set the characteristics and shaped the image of the Orient in their worldview. As Said noted, orientalism is a colonial discourse.<sup>8</sup>

With greater understanding of how orientalism and occidentalism came to be, how do we move toward post-occidental teaching? “From this recognition comes the redesign of teaching and learning around the pluriversity of knowledges and corresponding ways of being in the world.”<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Walter D. Mignolo, “Coloniality: The Darker side of Modernity,” *Revista Brasileira de Ciências Sociais* 32, no. 94 (2017): 39.

<sup>6</sup> Baker, “Modernity/Coloniality and Eurocentric Education,” 6.

<sup>7</sup> Baker, “Modernity/Coloniality and Eurocentric Education,” 6.

<sup>8</sup> Shehla Burney, *Pedagogy of the Other: Edward Said, Postcolonial Theory, and Strategies for Critique* (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2012), 26.

<sup>9</sup> Baker, “Modernity/Coloniality and Eurocentric Education,” 14.

So how do we incorporate a pluriversity of knowledge and move towards a pluriversal education system? First, we must understand that pluriversality is realized by “taking seriously the knowledge production of ‘non-Western’ critical traditions and genealogies of thought.”<sup>10</sup> Second, accept that pluriversal knowledges exist and integrate these knowledges into our systems. The notion of “other” should not be taught from an us-versus-them perspective, but rather from an all-encompassing perspective that includes multiple knowledge bases.

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Teachers are not exposed or trained to dismantle the system—rather, they often perpetuate it, often unknowingly. It is vital that teachers take more responsibility to change the ways in which they work.

## Indigenous Resurgence

Now that we have a better understanding of how Europe situated itself, we as teachers must consider those who have been considered “other”—such as the Indigenous peoples of Canada—and support their resurgence.

This is true for many Indigenous people around the world, almost all of whom have been subjugated to “otherness.” We must be an ally in the work to reconstruct indigenous identities and knowledge. We cannot be decolonial educators

without first acknowledging the blatant efforts to colonize and assimilate Indigenous people, locally and globally.

As a non-Indigenous person and educator, it is not for me to take space—rather I must use my privilege and position to create space for Indigenous people to share their knowledge. The classroom, the curriculum, and the way in which I approach teaching provide an opportunity to create this space. I must continuously underscore that “each Indigenous nation has its own way of articulating and asserting self-determination and freedom.”<sup>11</sup>

## Conclusion

To decolonize education, we must understand both the system that we work in and its historical context. Once we understand where our current societal systems are rooted, we can begin to deconstruct them. In turn, we can begin to build them up new systems—ones that reflect more of the immediate locality.

Moreover, it is important that teachers recognize the coloniality in the system. They must constantly question its purpose and work to change it. Awakened and more conscientious educators can work within the system to dismantle it.

It’s our responsibility to acknowledge the fabrication of the “other” and replace it with more inclusive ways of being. We must support marginalized groups—those currently deemed “other” in our system—in their resurgence and struggle. Context, history, empowerment, and understanding of our personal place in the system are essential to any philosophy of education.

<sup>10</sup> Capucine Boidin, James Cohen, & Ramon Grosfoguel “Introduction: From University to Pluriversity: A Decolonial Approach to the Present Crisis of Western Universities,” *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* 10, no. 1 (2012): 2.

<sup>11</sup> Taiiaki Alfred & Jeff Cornthassel, “Being Indigenous: Resurgences against Contemporary Colonialism” *Government and Opposition* 40, no. 4 (2005): 614.