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Decolonizing Online Development Studies? Emancipatory Aspirations and Critical Reflections – a Case Study

Sam Spiegel, Hazel Gray, Barbara Bompani, Kevin Bardosh and James Smith

Abstract

Academics in high-income countries are increasingly launching development studies programmes through online distance learning to engage practitioner-students in low-income countries. Are such initiatives providing opportunities to critically tackle social injustice or merely ‘mirroring’ relations of global inequality and re-entrenching imperial practices? Building on recent scholarship addressing efforts to ‘decolonise development studies’ and the complex power dynamics they encounter, we reflect on this question by analysing experiences of faculty and students in a United Kingdom-based online development studies programme, focusing particularly on perspectives of development practitioner-students working from Africa. We discuss barriers to social inclusivity - including the politics of language - that shaped participation dynamics in the programme as well as debates regarding critical development course content, rethinking possibilities for bridging counter-hegemonic development scholarship with practice-oriented approaches in a range of social contexts. Our analysis unpacks key tensions in addressing intertwined institutional and pedagogic dilemmas for an agenda towards decolonising online development studies, positioning decolonisation as a necessarily unsettling and contested process that calls for greater self-reflexivity.

Key words: decolonization; critical development studies; international development pedagogy; online distance education; e-learning, inequality and hegemony

Introduction

Campaigns to “decolonise” universities are now sparking heated debates across the globe, from Oxford to Cape Town and beyond. These reflect diverse student and faculty protests to hegemonic neoliberal practices and associated racialized, class-based, gendered and geographic inequities.¹ In 2013, Jonathan Langdon’s article “Decolonising Development Studies”² explored how decolonizing this discipline is an intellectually and institutionally complex process – one that needs to be continually adapted. “Decolonisation needs to occur,” he argued, “not only within Development Studies courses but also in the broader university systems in which they are delivered.” He called for a movement that entails “not only destabilising Eurocentric conceptual frameworks, but also actively contesting the continued colonisation and inequity in university programs and campuses.” Langdon’s argument offers an important critique that is targeted largely toward on-campus development studies programmes. While he did not discuss online classroom settings per se, we would argue that the needs he highlighted are even more critical in online distance learning programmes, where some e-learning modalities echo and re-entrench globalised inequities and Eurocentric learning. Conversely, online development studies courses can offer potentially unique avenues for certain anti-colonial approaches, creating new possibilities for participation and for challenging the status quo, including new ways of confronting the dynamics of “imperialist amnesia” (Kapoor, 2014: 1127) in present-day global development cultures. Engaging recent scholarship on decolonisation aspirations in development studies, we reflect on experiences in an online distance learning Masters programme offered in the United Kingdom (UK) that targeted development studies-practitioner students to explore global inequalities, focusing on experiences of students based in Africa. Exploring the programme over a five-year period, our analysis presents a typology of three fundamental complexities in advancing a critical decolonizing approach to online development studies, calling for more self-reflexive work in this field.

Describing the project of decolonizing as one committed “to dismantling dominant hegemony, hierarchies, and concentrations of power and control,” Paul Gorski stresses that “good intentions” do not necessarily prevent the replication and reification of dominant hegemonies.³ Vanessa Andreotti recently highlighted the need for creatively confronting legacies of colonial violence and radically “pushing the boundaries of international education”⁴ - by moving toward more explicit anti-colonial pedagogic engagement with how narratives of development conceal hegemony, harm and inequality. Writing in *Third World Quarterly*, Sina Salessi articulates how the very notion of decolonisation has - for some - been misconstrued, obfuscating links between the “Third World” and “the role of Western powers and economic processes of globalisation.”⁵ Also in *Third World Quarterly*, Oliver Turner memorably explained that the UN Special Committee on Decolonization has neglected forms of global colonialism that remain dominant forces today.⁶ It is in a context of highly ambiguous “post-colonial” development that universities worldwide have been launching new international development postgraduate programmes through online distance learning, generating pressing questions for debate: Do online programmes in development studies merely “mirror” existing relations of global inequality - and what does it mean for online distance learning to promote an “anti-colonial” and “counter-hegemonic” approach to development? Are such programmes stimulating radical thinking to tackle injustice? Can such e-learning be driven by and not merely “include” (in tokenistic or culturally reductive fashion) decolonial thinking rooted in alternative epistemologies besides dominant Western paradigms? Can e-learning creatively work towards a decolonizing agenda that meaningfully confronts Western institutional hegemonies and power imbalances in development studies?

In an essay entitled “Decolonization is not a metaphor,” Tuck and Wang memorably articulated why there needs to be much more discussion about “what is unsettling about decolonization”⁷ – to move past superficial discussions of decolonisation that see it as just a metaphor for any sort of social justice effort. Frantz Fanon famously wrote that “Decolonization never takes place unnoticed”⁸ – underscoring the need for a decolonizing ethic that disrupts and unsettles. Far from being an “event” that can be celebrated in programmatic reviews, we stress that decolonization needs to be seen as an intrinsically troubling process, one inviting inherently uncomfortable questions that interrupt entrenched ways of thinking, knowing and assuming and that challenge the premises of development work. As economic inequalities have been widening globally, growing disenchantment with conventional “managerialist” approaches in development curricula has driven new ways of challenging mainstream development ideology.⁹ Scholars have been exploring how universities can support new approaches for Critical Development Studies¹⁰ and what Clarke and Oswald called “capacity development for emancipatory social change.”¹¹ Various scholars have reflected on whether online distance learning creates equitable platforms for enhancing capabilities¹²; this has invited reflection not only on what is taught in

development curricula, but how it is taught, to whom and whether approaches critically address global challenges. Ståle Rye asks whether current emphasis on online distance learning in global development arenas reinforces “Western dominance in the global educational space or whether it will create a new open space where everyone can participate on an equal footing.”¹³ Speaking about decolonisation requires engaging these conflictual possibilities at once conceptually and empirically, and engaging deep structural factors in society that shape persistent inequities.

In both mainstream and more critical international development circles, increased policy attention on online distance education has generated a mixture of hopeful, celebratory, cautious and cynical thinking. New strategies to promote online distance education and e-learning are now being hailed as having the potential to radically transform higher education and reshape efforts to meet the United Nations’ Post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals in Africa.¹⁴ Yet fundamental questions remain about whether - and how - virtual learning environments can promote critical, culturally appropriate and equity-sensitive curricula on development issues.¹⁵ Amutabi and Oketch detailed how past World Bank-funded e-learning courses were ill-suited for African contexts and how teaching materials produced in the North did not have direct application and relevance to Africa.¹⁶ Critics have long warned that “notions of distance education are part of the trend towards uniformity under conditions of globalisation.”¹⁷ Recently, with the enormous popularity of “*Massive Online Open Courses*” (MOOCs) – an increasing focus of university administrators in prestigious universities across wealthier countries as efforts to “internationalize” curricula – concerns about the homogenizing effects of online learning are increasingly debated¹⁸, with some suggesting that “technofetishism” is “emblematic of the neoliberal turn in education.”¹⁹

Indeed, concerns about online distance learning programmes also echo growing debates about information and communication technology (ICT) for development more generally²⁰ calling for vigilance about technological optimism to meaningfully address power imbalances in understandings of development. Yet, there has been a relative dearth of critical case study analysis of online development studies programmes. Accordingly, the self-reflexivity called for by Kapoor (2004: 643) in development discussion – to think carefully through practices of representing, not representing and/or poorly (or imperially) representing subaltern voices, and “varying degrees of complicity” – is under-explored in this arena. With the cautions above, we reflect on experiences in a UK university programme aiming to address global inequities through online learning, engaging internationally-based development practitioners at diverse stages of their careers. The sections below situate the politics of this programme and explore how it raised intertwined philosophical, pedagogic and admissions dilemmas that, we argue, require critical reflection from academics involved in post-graduate development studies. To foreground our exploration of what a decolonising approach could entail, the first section below briefly outlines the context in the UK in which this programme was launched and the approach and methods of the study. The next sections discuss results from interviews, reviewing three sets of tensions and ambiguities encountered in building a decolonising approach for online learning. To conclude, the article argues that a concerted approach is needed towards addressing unequal access and barriers to participation, modes of participation and counter-hegemonic curricula. Our case study reflections add to wider debate on resisting systemic forces that can shape subtle and overt hegemonies in global development education²¹ and to Huish’s call for critical development studies curricula to support activism and forms of dissent that disrupt dominant power structures.²² We especially stress the need for carefully discussing - and not necessarily neatly reconciling - potential discrepancies between “practitioner”-oriented development teaching and radical theory if online development studies programmes are going to play a part in a decolonising agenda.

Contextualising the Launch of a Virtual Development Studies Programme

While online development programmes vary globally, many are being marketed vigorously as a way to access “world class experts” on development. For example, Paul Collier and Jeffery Sachs are featured prominently in advertisements for a recently launched online course on “Natural Resources for Sustainable Development” designed to target “civil society advocates, government officials, journalists, parliamentarians and other actors working to improve the management of oil, gas and minerals.”²³ In numerous cases such as the Collier/Sachs course, the programmes are explicitly about “applying new knowledge” and *not* billed as critical theory-driven, but rather part of a highly applied “policy” and “professional” oriented training ethos that has typified many online learning development initiatives. Our case study lies in the UK, which has seen a rapid growth in the number of international distance

learning programmes over the past fifteen years. In 2010, 37% of higher education institutions in the UK were offering at least one distance/online programme, including 1528 courses that were distance/online.²⁴ The field of “development studies” is just one of many to jump on the online distance learning bandwagon, but represents perhaps one of the more politically contentious fields for “virtual” learning given its colonial history. While online development studies curricula have potential to build capacities for critically challenging dominant “development” practices, they also have the potential to impose hegemonic worldviews from afar – thus stimulating debate on how students and faculty “experience” such programmes, including as potentially *transformative* experiences, as Rye stresses.²⁵

The programme on which we focus emerged during a period that coincided with increasing efforts by many university policymakers to tackle inequities in education for international students. Simultaneously, however, it was a period of increasingly neo-liberalized national policies for higher education in the UK – meaning higher tuition fees, precipitating massive student protests²⁶, with especially high fee increases introduced for international students. These challenges for international students were compounded by several factors amid contentious debates about how the UK government treats foreigners and immigrants. Stuart Tannock discusses national policies that increasingly restricted UK visas for international students²⁷ and various reports document the impacts of recent legislative changes that have been widely criticized as xenophobic, with exceedingly expensive fees that affected international student numbers and the elimination of free national health insurance for foreign students, among other “reforms”.²⁸ Patricia Walker discusses UK higher education policies for international students in the context of heated debates about post-colonialism, Conservative Party anti-immigrant rhetoric and pressures placed on university managers, memorably noting “the Home Secretary’s moves to curb international student numbers transports us back to the 60s where foreign students were not only a financial burden, but the undesirable other.”²⁹ In this context, many UK universities have been turning to online distance learning as an attractive alternative for international students who may not be able to come in person and pay high costs of living in the UK on top of other challenges.

Numerous institutions offering distance education and e-learning are now re-orienting “development” goals within their missions, sometimes with explicit reference to “social justice.”³⁰ The university on which this study is based launched its new international development distance learning programme in 2012 with input from across all three of the university’s faculties (social sciences and humanities, medicine and geosciences), after piloting courses in 2011. The programme was designed to promote critical development learning, offering a multi-media curriculum that addressed social justice issues spanning multiple regions of the world, but with a focus on case study material in Africa. In exploring what a “decolonisation process” might mean in this context, we agree with other scholars on the importance of contesting the intensive corporatisation of universities that has been occurring worldwide.³¹ While not all distance learning programmes are necessarily part of an aggressive corporatisation trend, and some faculty members may seek to oppose such trends, individual academics often have limited (if any) power to change high-level decisions such as tuition policies. Encountering the politics of systemic inequality can also raise numerous other interlinked anxieties for faculty and students about elitism. A decolonial lens for understanding global e-learning development initiatives requires rethinking the privileging – subtly and unintentionally – of a potentially elitist academic mind-set that carries forward a globally hegemonic notion of “highly ranked” higher education degree. European and North American universities can, despite good intentions, effectively contribute to “brain drain” and also much more subtle academic marginalisation of universities in poorer regions of the world. This is so particularly if there are not robust efforts made to learn from, value and partner with African universities, for example, for mutual benefit and in pursuit of explicitly anti-elitist goals.

Ultimately, there is a need to situate debate about “decolonising” UK-based programmes in the context of a much wider discussion of unresolved decolonization projects at several levels. Achille Mbembe recently cautioned about ongoing decolonisation challenges facing universities in Africa, articulating the enduring need to move out of a “Western way of knowledge production” that “disregards other epistemic traditions”³² while rethinking the importance of asking “*What are the limits placed on the ‘decolonization’ project by the forces of neoliberalism?*” What is key – in thinking about decoloniality – is being cognizant of *how* inequities in universities are imagined as geographical (and geopolitical) and highly gendered, racialized and class-based. Langdon stresses that the “decolonising of Development Studies must include an analysis of who is in classrooms, who leads them, and ultimately who the administrators are that frame them.”³³ In similar spirit, our approach explored intertwined sets of institutional and pedagogic dilemmas that shape social interactions, dilemmas that we found to be unresolved tensions in running a development studies programme online.

The methodology employed for this study included interviews with twenty-five practitioner-students from ten countries (across five continents, including five countries in Africa), interviews with academic teaching staff and reflections from the five authors' own experiences developing and teaching the courses. The approach thus integrates critical reflection that emanates from grounded experiences in the development and teaching processes of a postgraduate programme, with evidence derived from interviews complemented by analysis of literature. Building on similar approaches (e.g. Belda and colleagues analysed on-campus face-to-face development studies learning with students in a programme in Spain³⁴), we drew attention to dilemmas in facilitating critical learning with geographically disbursed international student-participants. Our approach is grounded in a reflective account of personal experiences teaching online and participating in developing a series of modules in virtual environments, and responds to calls for more integration of the experiences of university teachers and learners. The student-practitioner interviews, conducted in person or via Skype, comprised a purposive sample of students who were close to completing or who had recently completed courses, selected to offer a diversity of backgrounds, countries, and age groups, as well as gender balance. Responses and notes were coded and categorized; three main themes emerged, related to barriers to entry, modes of participation and pedagogic dilemmas in combining practice-based analysis and critical theory.

Three Themes for a Decolonising Approach

Theme 1 - Decolonising Barriers to Entry: Whose Notion of Development “Qualification”? Whose Notion of Language Proficiency?

The first theme identified related to who should be deemed “appropriately qualified” for admission – an issue fraught with potential discrimination in terms of class, gender, race and ethnicity but also age, geographical origin and language. In engaging this complexity, we revisit what Dibiase observed long before e-learning became so pervasive - that distance learners are “a qualitatively different, older population, with different educational needs from traditional on-campus undergraduates and graduate students.”³⁵ This triggered debate on what an “equitable” admissions process entails. University faculty members’ experiences engaging prospective students’ queries quickly confirmed Dibiase’s point and reinforced the dangers of embracing a narrow and hegemonic Western narrative of a “good applicant” (potentially: a young, privileged full-time student with high grades from prep schooling and perfect English). Many prospective students who contacted the university were working part-time in low-paying government jobs in Africa, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), health clinics, the education sector and other institutions – often with years of experience under their belt, and far more than most applicants in face-to-face programs. Academics and admissions officers agreed that since the goal of the programme is to foster an equitable approach to development, entry requirements should emphasise not only academic achievement but also practical experience. However debates occurred (and are continuing in 2016) as to how to evaluate practice-based qualifications. Applicants were encouraged to use their “personal statement” in the application to thoughtfully describe what they would bring to the programme as well as detail any relevant work experiences. Interpreting students’ “experience” revealed assessors’ biases. Discussions had to weigh the differential “formal” and “informal” practice-based qualifications, for example, comparing the experience of a nurse who founded a school in Kenya versus an applicant with a desk-based policy job at the World Bank.

The question of who is qualified for the programme was also tied to the question of how to satisfy the English language requirements for admissions. Many interviewees underscored the hegemonic role that English language proficiency plays, offering views that echo a growing stream of critical scholarship on language in international studies. For example, Lili Koridze discusses elitism in global distance learning, building on Noam Chomsky’s linguistic turn towards cultural analysis, and poses the question “*Is it fair to expect the whole world to engage the practices of distance education in English?*”³⁶ The attractiveness of being part of a UK-based online distance-learning programme in development was illustrated by a prospective student from Sudan, who expressed both difficulties in meeting the language proficiency testing requirements as well as enthusiasm in struggling through various administrative steps. He noted: “Programs like this are not available in Khartoum or anywhere else in Africa... You find the development studies departments are not up to date and there is no flexibility for working people. You have to do fulltime attendance, which was not possible for me...” However, he expressed frustration with the UK Border Agencies’ increasingly restrictive policies for proving English language proficiency that many UK universities have applied to distance learning students and face-to-face students equally. This Sudanese student identified challenges that were nested

within additional sets of bureaucratic and financial barriers he encountered, even after securing financial sponsorship from his United Nations employer to participate in this distance learning programme:

“To get into the program you need documents you had to get from your old universities, you had to provide curricula, you had to prove your ability to work in the English language...gathering everything that was needed was not so easy. They [university administrators] demanded many things from you...It was not easy to get all these things to the UK. But I did it, even though there have been many challenges!”

Indeed the restrictive manner of English language proficiency verification and related government policies (and university interpretations of those) raised the spectre of racism. Proof of language test results were required from countries such as Uganda, Zimbabwe and Ghana where advanced formal English schooling is common and heavily institutionalized, while students from high-income countries such as Canada would not have to meet the same language requirements, even if their mother tongue was not English (e.g. French, if they came from Quebec). That citizenship - not mother tongue - dictated UK Border Agency language proficiency verification policies was argued by several interviewees as discriminatory against many African as there are no African countries on the list of 16 countries exempt from the proof of English language proficiency requirement.³⁷ It was not uncommon for qualified applicants from low-income countries to be turned away from distance learning and face-to-face graduate programmes due to failure to meet all requirements for UK visas, including applicants with prestigious international scholarships such as Commonwealth Scholarships.

McNamara, drawing on Derrida’s notion of the “shibboleth” as a site of struggle over signification, explores some of the potentially discriminatory and indeterminate features of language test scores.³⁸ Interestingly, the three faculties that contribute to teaching the MSc programme in this university each had slightly different internal policies for approaching language.³⁹ Teaching staff from all three faculties indicated that high quality applicants had been turned away or held back in the early part of the programme’s existence (2012 and 2013) for not having shown English language proficiency from tests administered within the previous two years. In some cases, applicants from low-income countries who had received PhDs and MSc degrees from top-ranked UK and North American universities were told they needed to take new language tests, and in several cases, students reported difficulties in being able to travel from rural parts of Africa to cities with English test centres. Language tests can be expensive and they are only offered a few times a year in many African test centres. By 2013, the faculty with the most stringent policies began to increase its flexibility on the matter of language, by acknowledging that *some* prior degrees in English⁴⁰ and *some* professional employers’ letters⁴¹ could be sufficient proof of English language proficiency. The university took this laudable position despite on-going pressure from the UK government to create restrictive guidelines for regulating international student recruitment.⁴² In 2016, following massive media coverage of the Syrian refugee crisis, the university again experimented further with modes of language testing for international students, including refugees interested in distance learning, recognising widespread economic and geographical obstacles to accessing official language test facilities in many countries.

Nonetheless, faculty members also saw cases in 2016 where prospective students from English language countries such as Liberia did not successfully “jump through all the hoops” and were even told (explicitly in administrative emails) that, due to the UK Border Agency’s tight restrictions on universities, their English proof has simply not been sufficient. Amid growing concern that universities are being ‘disciplined’ by the government, some administrative staff exhibited considerable “reluctance” to experiment with language testing approaches beyond conventional test centre-based methods. As UK government policies towards foreigners continue to generate widespread accusations of xenophobia, the MSc development studies programme academic faculty have been holding strategy discussions with admissions staff across the university and have delivered policy briefs stressing the importance of decolonial and equity considerations in recruitment to this programme.

Our point here is to stress that academics involved in teaching development studies have vital roles beyond just ensuring critical pedagogy in curricula, as critical learning in development studies is not divorced from politically contentious admission policies that profoundly affect who can become part of the development studies class. Critical reflexivity requires thinking through the wider context for building equity in the classroom, starting from admission criteria. This is especially needed in the UK, where national policies towards foreign students in 2016 are becoming even more restrictive partly as a result of terrorism fears and aggressive political moves to reduce numbers of migrant students in the UK. Concerns

in this regard have been amplified several-fold in the context of the Brexit referendum, widely understood to have been predicated on xenophobic politics.

Theme 2 - Decolonizing Access, Problematizing Technologies of Participation

The second major theme that arose focused on structuring access to and modalities of online learning technologies of participation - a major consideration in confronting systemic problems of Eurocentric, class-based and race-based discrimination in online development studies programmes. History is littered with development schemes that position international students as “objects of development” (Stein, 2016 p. 5) whose participatory involvement must bend to the demands, techniques and interactive frameworks of an imperial education model. In the programme we studied, team members across the three university faculties agreed to use the same virtual learning platform, namely Moodle, which facilitates a mix of learning approaches, integrating readings, lecture videos, online reflections, quizzes and group discussion forums, utilising both asynchronous and real-time interaction. These provided windows into a range of theory debates from Marxist critiques to broader reflections on (complementary and diverging) analytical tools for interrogating ethics, modernisation, imperialism, dispossession and globalisation. While new digital learning technologies for development education are often far from panaceas for overt and subtle reasons⁴³, the platform chosen in this case was free, unlike many high-cost virtual learning platforms that have been commercialized for university licensing, and its technical options are adaptable. Although this mixed-medium model enabled students and staff to interact in various e-learning formats, dilemmas arose related to how the curriculum design process should take into account technology barriers in low-income countries and how the virtual classroom set-up should structure critical learning trajectories.

While the teaching strategy integrated video lectures with online discussion board assignments, there were different perspectives regarding video *bandwidth* being a barrier for students in some countries where Internet connections are less accessible or reliable. Some students from Mozambique and South Africa reported that they found that continuous access to reliable bandwidth was a considerable challenge. Yet, other participants felt that the videos were important: “The videos were especially helpful for those non-English speakers - like myself - who can stop the video and start again if I am missing something.” The markedly different perceptions partly related to the personal situation of the students including their role and status in the jobs they pursued part-time as development practitioners. As Thompson noted, it is important for the developmental community to ask “difficult questions about whether ICT initiatives are actually increasing equitable access to the freedoms and life-chances that form the basis of modern developmental initiatives—or whether they are merely creating or exacerbating further inequality.”⁴⁴ Given the unique benefits of video lectures as a tool for multi-cultural engagement, a common understanding was reached that video lectures did have a role in the pedagogic strategy – to varying degrees in the different development courses. Nonetheless, it needed to be recognized that while video lectures can help in learning about global inequities online, making these videos too dominant a part of the programme could itself present an inequity. As one student noted, “[In my job] there was lots of travelling to remote areas where there was no access to internet. Some of these areas in Sudan you [can] not even bring attractive things like computers there anyways! So I had to sometimes leave it [my computer] at home.” Moreover, the student continued to explain how technology challenges were caught up in wider *geopolitical* tensions (the geopolitical tensions being a rather unexpected finding from the interview):

“Sudan is after all under American sanctions so you find funny things – like for example, Flash Player is illegal to download so some videos from the course, I had to wait until I was outside of Sudan on a business travel to update my Flash Player to play these videos! Google Chrome helped me a lot. Also the IT support was very helpful for me in tech support. I would send material to IT support and they would upload it. Like for example in the essays since Gateway was blocked for me.”

Similarly, establishing mandatory participation in live interaction sessions became a dilemma. While the courses were designed to help students develop critical thinking during their NGO work and hearing from other participants in the programme was key, global differences in technological capacity and busy work schedules amongst practitioners made simultaneous participation across time zones difficult. Barraclough and McMahon found that the most effective strategies for achieving transformative learning about power and privilege were exchanges in which students could directly

interact in real-time.⁴⁵ This was also found in our study, in which students expressed how live discussions served to challenge hegemonic ideas about development. Although live Skype sessions were a highlight for some students, the evolving curriculum philosophy did not stress mandatory presence in Skype seminars, but instead emphasized asynchronous interaction online – providing choice of time-scales to form critiques of development paradigms, initiatives and discourses. Different periods of time for this corresponded to diverse critical response styles, from quick reflections to detailed mappings of inter-related forms of economic, cultural and political hegemony.

At the same time, institutional models for “new” online development learning were also seen by faculty to be at odds with certain requests for flexibility. For example, in one case a prospective student from Cameroon requesting taking the courses by having a CD with all the materials, as his job required extensive travel in rural villages during the first semester of the programme. Reconciling dilemmas about balancing work and travel commitments on one hand with academic interactions required context-specific attention to student circumstances. The philosophy adopted in this development studies programme reinforced the view that online teaching should strive to build a close-knit online community with student interaction at the heart of learner-centred environments. This contrasted with a focus on technology for transmitting face-to-face curricula in a one-way “knowledge delivery” communication mode - an increasingly fashionable strategy of “university internationalisation,” especially through MOOCs⁴⁶. In this case of this Cameroon-based applicant, building a close-knit online learning community was deemed by academic staff to be the priority and with reluctance, ultimately saw the student’s request declined by the university. Our point is to stress that, particularly when real-life obstacles of prospective students are given attention and reflected upon closely, the twin spectres of technological and pedagogical imperialism can seem that much more immanent. Academics must grapple with anxieties about how notions of the “right time and space” for study may be negotiated - and even “resolved” in ways that can still seem inherently discriminatory or particular.

While faculty may strive for adapting modes of participation, technologies of participation are never neutral and academics invariably need to confront dilemmas regarding how inclusive and cohesive online group learning modalities may be in opening up space for critical Africa-UK teaching/learning engagement and for engaging historically marginalized population groups. Through online discussion boards, we (as teaching staff) sought to promote critical debate about online representation, linking theoretical theory texts with exercises unpacking a range of websites and Youtube videos (e.g. including of North American rap videos representing “Africa’s blood diamonds” and other popular culture controversies, for example) – while, in addition, reflecting explicitly in virtual classrooms on how participation online was uneven, with certain subaltern voices not present. Strategic curriculum choices were themselves often fraught with dilemmas about the limits of participation.

Theme 3 – Decolonizing the Curriculum Content: Merging Critical Development Theory and Practitioner-Oriented Pedagogy

The third major theme focused on the curriculum’s integration of de-colonial theory and critical pedagogy to explore “practice-based” learning. Michael Woolcock argued that curricula offered in international development programmes need to be “attuned to (a) the distinctive educational environment in which it is located *vis-a-vis* graduate schools of business, law, medicine, and the arts and science; (b) the enormous diversity of employment options and career trajectories (most of which are difficult to predict *ex ante*) that graduates face; and (c) the heterogeneity of their students’ academic, cultural and professional backgrounds.”⁴⁷ The development studies programme that we studied was “located” across three university faculties (health, environment and social science), attracting students with widely different career trajectories and cultural, academic and professional backgrounds. The curricula aimed to suit students interested in enhancing skills for work with development organisations as well as civil society, the private sector and government departments. However, academics in the programme sought to promote a critical anti-colonial approach to development and critical engagement with issues of political and economic inequity regardless of the students’ career trajectory. Efforts toward achieving this goal were never simple, as various writing exercises and critical reflection activities sought to bring students together to unpack complex and contested notions of inequity and hegemony, and to rethink the very framing of North/South power relations. As noted by Barraclough and McMahon, tensions in intercultural learning certainly manifest in online learning environments, sometimes creating “disorienting dilemmas” - about ways of conceptualizing and addressing power relations, racial inequalities, class and privilege, for example. Two critical questions underpinning some of the “disorienting dilemmas” we encountered are briefly discussed below.

i) Dilemma 1: Whose Sensibilities for Critically Unpacking International Development Work?

The curriculum explored a range of approaches pertaining to the study of so-called “Third World issues” (a notion interrogated for its potential power to “homogenize” the Global South), revisiting historical shifts in development ideology in global institutions over the past three decades⁴⁸ and alternative perspectives to dominant discourses of “development” through analysis of media discourses, social movements discourses and international development project reports. The coursework explored why, as Jacoby and Kothari argue, social theory needs to be embedded much more in empirical development analysis.⁴⁹ Activity-focused coursework in online case study modules involved theoretically-informed individual private reflections (submitted online) and collective group discussion (communicating in online discussion boards) addressing power dynamics in the framing of challenges facing social movements and “development alternatives”⁵⁰ in land tenure struggles, global/national/local HIV-AIDS policy debates and sustainable development policies. In one of the course modules, students posted their analyses of the importance and potential limits of a “rights-based approach” in relation to particular development debates in Africa and were required to post comments about other students’ writing on rights-based approaches. Dilemmas arose, however, about the degree to which personal experiences from the field should be used in relation to academic discussion of global issues. Students working in NGOs were keen to share insights from their NGO fieldwork through critical academic lenses - yet conveyed in a manner that did not compromise their relationships with their employers.

As e-learning platforms promote a “flexible approach” that allows students to contextualise learning in a manner suited to their own professional practice whilst simultaneously developing as a member of a learning community⁵¹, different students used personal reflections in diverse ways, at times formally (referencing academic literature) and at times informally (e.g. unstructured reflections after long days of NGO fieldwork). While some students who were not experienced practitioners, felt somewhat intimidated initially as they did not have rich stories from the field to share, in other cases, students reflected on the need to balance “becoming more critical” with “keeping a positive vibe alive”, as reflected by this student:

“I think the course is very critical of stakeholders in development, which is good – we may have good intentions but this is not always enough. It was really an eye opener to think about development away from good intentions but sometimes you feel like ‘what can I do?’ so I think although we should be critical we need to keep a positive vibe, especially when we are working in development issues.”

Indeed the courses were structured to encourage students to explore practical solutions but also to challenge hegemonic assumptions in mainstream policy literature. As online interaction opens up space for critical reflection on knowledge production, marrying academic exploration and professional experiences creates useful (if uneven) opportunities for rigorous learning about international inequities, recognizing especially, as Lewis argued, that “NGO research [in development studies] to date...although wide-ranging and diverse, has often lacked theoretical rigour, contextual understanding and empirical detail.”⁵² We took particular interest in insights voiced by students who worked in NGOs. As one student in South Africa articulated, “It is interesting to work in [an NGO] during the day and come back to my academic studies in the evening” noting as well, “I was reading some of the course readings to my colleagues [in the NGO].” The experiences reported suggested that where “academic rigour” was informed by an explicit contemplation of links between academic and practitioner settings, academic work could be all the more compelling. Yet, there was a risk that academic work could be too closely replicating dominant international development consultancy cultures if uncritically framed, with too narrow a focus on universalised assumptions about progress and technocratic policymaking; this needed to be avoided as well.

Asking the question “*Whose sensibilities for critically unpacking international development work?*” also led faculty to reflect on the need for significant reforms to the curriculum in 2016 - including, above all, exercises to engage students in discussion on imperial knowledge production and the (in)visibility of authors from the countries being discussed. An adaptation in September 2016 was to have the entire MSc programme start with a crowd-sourcing exercise in which students were asked (in week 1) to find and share texts written by authors from the “Global South” – an activity that sought to explore the importance of exploring African scholars particularly, to see these authors as the starting points around which ideas are framed, rather than globally renowned development academics students likely knew before the programme (Jeffrey Sachs, Paul Collier, James Ferguson, etc.). As Sharon Stein wrote, “Incorporating more non-Western knowledges into Western universities is both necessary and

risky, as it may lead to them being misheard and misrepresented.” We re-iterate this caution – as well as the importance of inviting students (early in their learning) to explicitly explore Stein’s question “What precautions are necessary so that the incorporation of more non-Western knowledges into Western universities does not result in their tokenism, decontextualization, or exploitation?” Other questions are equally needed – including encouraging students to consider structure as political: if you were designing the curriculum, how might you order it differently and what is at stake in the politics of ordering?

Notably, some of our students were academic lecturers at African universities, felt they benefited from affiliation with a UK branded university and expressed plans to use curriculum ideas to build capacity within their own institutions. Just as course instructors had to invite students to think openly about what authors and what kinds of theory choices “led” their analysis - and *whether* an ethos of “naturalizing” development or “de-naturalizing” development was being embraced - the course instructors had to be careful to generate critical thinking while not imposing assumptions about how international development “works or doesn’t work.” Just as Clegg and colleagues wrote that “critical pedagogy, as an ideal type, does not suggest particular solutions, rather it rejects the framing of ‘problems’ and ‘solutions’ in the dominant ideology”⁵³, students were invited to reflect on various kinds of academic expertise when challenging notions of “expertise” in prescriptive development policy analysis – to challenge both the framing of “problems” and the framing of “solutions” as well as the wider linear logics – by, for example, drawing mind-maps with multiple webs of social relation and chains of causality and posting them online, to challenge entrenched “expert” narratives on environmental, health and economic issues.⁵⁴ The teaching dilemmas encountered here also tapped into a much wider debate about whether a decolonising lens works at all in the context of student-practitioners who saw their task of learning as instrumental (for set institutional purposes) rather than as explicitly counter-hegemonic and anti-colonial.

ii) Dilemma 2: How to Challenge Dominant Ideologies Safely/Critically?

Related to the above, dilemmas centred on “how to challenge” dominant ideologies in conducting research in a practice-based project format. Whether students should see academic study as an “independent time away” from work or as an “embedded” academic/practitioner experience can be interpreted differently by different students, and these choices partly reflect the degree to which student’s work interests (in UN agencies, NGOs, government, multinational corporations etc.) create space for wholly independent-minded academic scrutiny of international issues. Using Uma Kothari’s critique of neoliberal agendas and “professionalization within the development industry,”⁵⁵ the curriculum explored perspectives on consultancy cultures in relation to student-practitioner positionality. “An essay is very different from a consultancy report,” stressed one highly experienced student, who was adamant that academic work should be a critical departure from the kinds of international development writing projects to which she had grown accustomed over more than two decades of consulting. This contrasted moderately with the perspectives of other students, who, in some cases were keen to gain skills in practical policy-analysis writing styles, with the view that academic assignments might also be shared later with employers (a view that was not embraced by all students). As one student articulated, reflecting on being a “frontliner” in development,

“On the frontlines you often do not have time to read so you find a divide between the thinktanks and the frontliners, between knowledge managers and frontliners and this needs to be bridged. You find you are doing things in day-to-day work as development worker, but really you do not know the motivation or the theoretical background...”

While it was agreed that a “reflexive turn” in the curriculum was needed to challenge dominant development ideology as a potential threat to learning critical (and certainly radical) approaches to development, the question of how reflexivity should be explored generated debate.

Experiences highlight the need for a focus on cognitive outcomes in teaching – creating a learner support services program “where students feel at home, where they feel valued, and which they find manageable”⁵⁶ but also where they are encouraged to question the sense of authority embedded in international institutional discourses. This included the discourses in reports by some of the same institutions in which students were working as practitioners, creating tension and ambivalence but also critical excitement and enthusiasm. As one student who worked on HIV/AIDS in Namibia stressed,

“I was shocked by the role of the IFIs in development and how they designed global structures to maintain themselves but at the same time they maintain poverty. I had

thought this before, you know, from newsfeeds and people but never really felt confident about it, but now I am really critical of western neoliberal power structures.”

Some students are genuinely keen to tread in new, potentially uncomfortable intercultural spaces when reflexively analysing their own assumptions about “development” and practitioner projects. Authoritative reports published in conjunction with World Bank policies, the United Nations Millennium Development Goals and Post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals, the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment and the World Health Organization were examined in the curricula as reports that produce certain kinds of contested knowledge, generating political debate. Working with practitioner-students in a cross-generational group - with participants in this programme ranging from 23 years old to 80 years old - facilitated the sharing of diverse insight on how to critique the past and present policies for development, highlighting the need for curricula that promoted optimism, cynicism and realism at different stages of the course. The experiences in this programme highlighted the need for critical pedagogy especially in engaging practitioners from health and environmental sciences, not just social sciences and humanities disciplines. Despite the potential discomfort relating to critiquing one’s own institution, there was general agreement that online classroom materials addressing global injustices need to be framed in open-ended fashions to encourage debate on the limitations of dominant perspectives, their implications and their contested interpretations in the “Global South”; but also how hierarchies and inequalities shape classroom experiences. This meant exploring how students from a variety of countries exchanged critical thoughts, challenged assumptions and interrogated overt and subtle power dynamics in knowledge production. Just as Andreotti recently asked “*Why does it seem natural for us (and for people in other places) to believe that people in poorer countries need the help of Canadians?*” this kind of questioning spirit remains key in an online learning environment connecting participants in the UK and Africa that explores how Western colonialism and hegemonies have, through power-laden and disputed processes, structured development practices and academic scholarship itself.

Conclusions: Reinvigorating Decolonisation Aspirations in Online Development Studies

Global politics and hegemonic forces can shape online development studies programmes in a great many ways. Our analysis explored three sets of tensions that development scholars encounter when creating, teaching and administering online development studies programmes. Rather than starting with development studies course material itself, our observations and reflections led us to start with an underlying concern about the very admissions processes as potential barriers that determine who participates and whose voices are present (and not present) in development studies courses online. The analysis provides a framework for addressing pressing equity issues of concern to students, faculty and university administrators alike and contributes to burgeoning debate on what a “decolonising” lens for online development studies might entail. We add to the call that educators in development studies need to pursue many related decolonising processes at once – echoing Langdon’s call “to continually unlearn our own Eurocentrism, to build pedagogies that destabilise Eurocentric norms our students may hold” – and broadly – “to actively challenge the structures of inequity that maintain colonial relations on and off our campuses, and throughout the world in which we work.”⁵⁷

Given a global context of Western university expansion to find new student markets in online development studies, academics need to be cautious of decisions that may undermine learning spaces in the South and exacerbate racial, class-based and geographical imbalances in development studies. The project of decolonization is urgent, but not straightforward, and invites attention to multiple, overlapping, related, and at times competing, agendas. Although there have been “many transformations in Western institutions of higher education, thanks to the tireless counter-hegemonic efforts of scholars, students, and activists”⁵⁸ efforts to be “decolonial” are invariably implicated in politically charged institutional environments and dilemmas of power and positionality. In an effort to go beyond asking *what* to teach to asking *how* online international development programmes should be taught, we have outlined some of the tensions in pursuing an agenda that seeks to engage structural inequalities amid an uneven playing field for African participation in UK development studies. The experiences we explored illustrate the need to ensure that neoliberal preoccupation with technological innovation does not overshadow deeper inequalities, ensuring that “technofetishism” does not displace focus on complex equity debates. Our experiences underscore the need for academics to actively tackle structural inequalities that begin at the admissions, recruitment and curriculum set-up stages of online

development programmes, where decisions made can have powerful impacts on experiences of students and faculty in “North/South” online learning initiatives.

Finally, as international student recruitment strategies of UK higher institutions are currently attracting unprecedented, emotionally charged debate (particularly as national anti-immigrant policies are becoming increasingly aggressive – especially in the aftermath of the 2016 Brexit referendum⁵⁹), new attention is focusing on the goals, possibilities and limitations of online distance learning initiatives as ways of engaging international development practitioners. To avoid the kind of top-down model of World Bank e-learning that Amutabi and Oketch critiqued⁶⁰, online education initiatives in the field of international development need to continually be vigilant to adopt critical pedagogies that take equity considerations into account in decisions regarding how the course will be taught. While development researchers often fear that academic and practitioner wings of their disciplines are moving further apart, there is a need to critically reflect on what integrating practitioner experiences in development scholarship means – including how students see the blending of critical theory with practitioner work – and whether this can raise opportunities for research that is “useful” and “creative” in confronting hegemonic power. Development academics need to be willing to experiment in new intellectual territory in this regard and also to actively bring pedagogic and administrative dilemmas to bare on wider debates about decolonising university institutions and learning environments. As online distance learning initiatives such as the one described here continue to develop in the years ahead, it is key that perspectives of students from African countries and other countries in the “Global South” inform pedagogic and institutional approaches to curriculum development for development studies. A decolonising lens provides a vital, albeit uneasy, starting place for this discussion.

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