

How do we teach the world? A conversation about decolonization, processes of unlearning and 'aha moments' in institutions of Higher Education

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Angaben zur Veröffentlichung / Publication details:

Capan, Zeynep Gulsah, Sebastian Garbe, and Michaela Zöhrer. 2020. "How do we teach the world? A conversation about decolonization, processes of unlearning and 'aha moments' in institutions of Higher Education." *Acta Academica* 52 (1): 76–88.
<https://doi.org/10.18820/24150479/aa52i1/sp5>.

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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18820/24150479/aa52i1/SP5>

ISSN: 0587-2405

e-ISSN: 2415-0479

Acta Academica • 2020 52(1):
76-88

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How do we teach the world?

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First submission: 16 October 2019

Acceptance: 15 June 2020

Published: 28 August 2020

Introduction

The following is the result of a recorded discussion or dialogue that we, the authors of this contribution, had in June 2019. In previous conversations we had already settled on some central questions for discussion. Among the guiding questions were: how do colonialism and racism shape the world in which we are teaching? How does this affect us as university teachers? How did we become uncomfortable with coloniality, racism, and Eurocentrism within institutions of higher education (HE) and what are our personal concerns and positionalities? What does teaching at the university mean to us and (how) do we challenge traditional teaching practices? And finally, what kind of knowledges do we teach and how are they intersecting with traditional academic texts? Our conversation, like almost every good and inspiring conversation, has developed its own dynamics. Anticipating this, we decided to record our dialogue. Even in conversations that may at first appear to be uncontroversial, aspects arise that reveal new and unexplored questions. We all believe in the idea of (un-)learning from each other and of (un-)learning together.

Michaela: In their widely discussed article 'Decolonization is not a Metaphor' Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012) criticize the 'easy adoption of decolonizing discourse by educational advocacy and scholarship' that 'turns decolonization into a metaphor' (Tuck and Yang 2012: 1). They critique those (of us) who are in privileged positions, the profiteers of colonialism trying to capture and work through their complicity 'without giving up land or power or privilege, without having to change much at all' (Tuck and Yang 2012: 10). The first question I'd like to discuss with you is: Do you use the framing of 'to decolonize teaching' when you think about how to teach the world?

Gulsah: To 'decolonize' needs to be unpacked. Taking the point made by Tuck and Yang, one needs to be careful in what contexts and in reference to which political struggles decolonizing is being used. It should, as a process or practice, relate to questioning the coloniality of institutions that we inhabit and cannot only be achieved through adding more perspectives into our syllabi. As such, what I am mindful of is that it does not turn into a mere synonym for diversity (Bhanot 2015). What I prefer to follow in my teaching practices is the aim of unlearning, and seeing it as a step into thinking, conceptualizing and practicing decolonization. At least for myself it is also about being cognizant of the fact that there is a lot I have to unlearn beforehand.

Michaela: When I talk about 'decolonizing teaching', I have mostly used 'to decolonize' as a metaphor, I suppose. What about you, Sebastian?

Sebastian: I also definitely use the metaphor of 'decolonizing' for my teaching. In my intellectual engagement with those issues coined 'decolonial', it came up almost instinctively. This is because the critical theoretical perspectives from Latin America with which I mostly engage came to be known as decolonial perspectives or theory (Castro-Gómez and Grosfoguel 2007; Gutiérrez Rodríguez, Boatcă, and Costa 2016). Still, people and especially students get confused about the different prefixes and want to know the difference between the post- and the decolonial. For me the most important issue is to understand and learn about different challenges and approaches to the colonial question (Garbe 2017). While I don't perceive these battles over labels as fruitful, I want to thank you, Michaela, for bringing up this important critique of the 'decolonial as a metaphor'. A similar, rather polemic critique has been proposed by the Bolivian intellectual Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (2018: 15), who described the postcolonial as a desire, the anticolonial as a struggle and the decolonial as an outrageous neologism. This relates very much to the argument of Tuck and Yang (2012).

While some people reduce these issues to academic feuds, I think some of the critiques help to highlight important points and I wanted to share my ideas with you, which, I think, relate to what Gulsah said. To start with, I have a slight problem

with the term 'decolonial' as an adjective and think it would be much more fruitful to think of it as a verb: to decolonize. My argument is that the adjective 'decolonial' implies that there is, or that we could reach, something that is decolonial in the proper sense, completely liberated from its colonial entanglements and hence 'non-colonial'. Salman Sayyid, in a conference¹ two years ago, said that we cannot unsee what we have already seen, and I think he is right. We cannot erase the history of the last 500 years of colonial entanglements neither materially, nor ideologically. In that way, for me it is important to highlight 'decolonization' or 'decolonizing' as a process and not to fall into a trap by thinking that we can actually think or live within a non-colonial world. So, I would be careful with the idea of describing something as decolonial.

Another important aspect of this debate is the context – when or where are we talking and thinking about 'decolonization'? For example, the article of Tuck and Yang (2012) was written in a former settler colonial context, right? And in the US/Canada context, I would say, decolonization means something different than when we talk about decolonization in Germany, for example. I have been engaged in political and pedagogical projects in Germany, the postcolonial city collectives, who aim to push forward a debate about the colonial past and postcolonial present of German policy, society and education. But Germany has a very particular history of coloniality and hence the struggle for decolonization shifts with the context. Raising awareness in Germany about its colonial past and present means something very different than, for example, in a context like Australia, collaborating with Aboriginal struggles. We could even use different terms for those efforts, but these contexts are still somehow linked together, aren't they?

So, while I agree with the critique of the 'decolonial as a metaphor', I still think it is possible to decolonize much more than just material or territorial relations. For me, decolonization can take place in very different areas of social existence, as Aníbal Quijano (2014) would say, which is why we need to talk about decolonizing subjectivities, gender and labour relations, the Eurocentric human-nature divide, but also the way we educate ourselves and others. But I have a feeling that there is another reason you brought up the issue – am I right, Michaela?

Michaela: Well, before I knew about debates like 'Decolonization is not a Metaphor' I used 'to decolonize' somewhat heedlessly, I suppose. For sure, I had some ideas in my mind when talking about decolonizing teaching. This obviously includes critical perspectives on Eurocentrism (Kerner 2018) and discussions

1 'Challenging Academic Debates: Decolonizing Knowledge Production', University of Leeds, 24 May 2017.

with my students about 'entangled histories' (Randeria 2002). It is important not to reduce global dependencies to a current phenomenon or a simple analytical task when teaching social sciences. We have to think about recent globalization processes – economic, political as well as cultural. And we have to find ways to overcome the so-called methodological nationalism (Wimmer/Glick Schiller 2002). But in fact, something essential is missed if we avoid discussing a shared colonial past and postcolonial continuities – or even pre-colonial realities so far as this knowledge is still available and not completely eradicated.

Decolonisation can therefore mean broadening and unsettling conventional perspectives. Of course, there is much more to consider if you are talking about decolonization not only (more or less) metaphorically. I am still looking for a suitable term with an '-ing' to describe the necessary step to (non-linear) processes of learning, which, I believe, should include not only recognizing the prevalence of colonial power structures but raise broader questions of power, representation and positionality. I am interested not only in practices and structures of difference more generally regarding global historical interconnectedness and continuities of colonial orders, but also of all the other '-isms', like racism, sexism, classism and their intersections. In line with postcolonial as well as feminist thinking, I believe we should be sensitive to differences as well as to hierarchies that result from historically established relations of power, dominance and resistance. These are still 'at work' on global as well as on national and regional levels, in the Global North and the Global South, in the academy, popular and 'high' culture, the media and our everyday life. They are 'at work' like the various 'isms' I mentioned. And we are all part of systemically anchored, relationally constituted '-isms' – as subjects that are in some respects simultaneously privileged and/or marginalized.

The concept of 'unlearning' could be helpful here. Gulsah, you were also talking about the need for unlearning (of privileges), right? I want a term that is more modest than 'decolonization', because my teaching aim is not to change the whole system. Maybe I'm too moderate. As you said, Sebastian, I also wonder: Is a non-colonial world after hundreds and hundreds of years of colonialization even possible? Similarly, I am looking for a more cautious concept that helps me to describe the first essential steps to start transformations or a process of change in the ways we are teaching the world. This is why I have brought this point into our debate. I am searching for a language which helps to describe the issues I have mentioned and which, at the same time, does not promise any definite, simple answers. Maybe the idea of unlearning could be inspiring and helpful in this regard. I hope we can talk about this in more detail.

Gulsah: I agree with the notion that it should be conceptualized as a process rather than an end. But what I want to underline is that 'decolonizing' needs to

be conceptualized and discussed much more critically in terms of outlining what it entails beyond changing syllabi, and what sorts of institutional struggles it is meant to relate to. Keeping in mind that structures of inequality are not the same across time and space, there need to be further reflections about contexts and different strategies. Just to clarify: I am not against using the concept but rather to be more mindful of what is meant when we use it, to reflect on the potential of the present 'moment of decolonization' and to open space to acknowledge that there were other moments (Çapan 2017, Pailey 2019). 'Unlearning' is more about the process, perhaps a never-ending process, where we continuously unlearn what we have naturalized in different (colonial) guises. A second reason I at times prefer 'unlearning' is that 'decolonize' seems to have become the 'popular' word of our time for those who want to signal their criticality and those gestures have inherent dangers that empty out critique.

Michaela: I think 'unlearning' is already very popular, isn't it? I really like the idea that this is not an easy process but one that must hurt. As Maria do Mar Castro Varela puts it with reference to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1990: 9) project of 'un-learning our privilege as our loss': 'Unlearning is not a gesture, but an exhausting experience of learning-practice' (Castro Varela 2017). What do you think about the unlearning concept, Sebastian?

Sebastian: I think this concept is very challenging. It could probably help to find a common language for all those things we worry and wonder about regarding our teaching. Within this quest, the idea of unlearning might be helpful to describe a shared point of departure, which is this uneasy feeling towards the terms and content of contemporary HE and the desire to do something else. Then again, the outcome of this desire might be something very different, because it is contextual and depends on what and where we are teaching. What I want to say is that talking about race and racism in the classroom is different to learning from and about decolonial movements, for example. And I argue that we have to make the effort to see whether and how those issues actually fit together.

I will go back to the idea of unlearning in a second, because I wanted to share with you some aspects of the language I have been using to describe my teaching experiences. Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) uses the phrase, 'Epistemologies of the South'; with this term he refers to all those knowledges, cosmologies and epistemologies that have been subalternized within or directly excluded from hegemonic, Eurocentric knowledge systems. Teaching epistemologies from the South then would mean introducing certain perspectives and knowledges that haven't been part of the so-called classical canon of the social sciences. And this is a very particular thing, I guess. I also really like the metaphor to think *with* the South or the Global South and not to think *about* the Global South like traditional

anthropology or area studies have taught us. These are some of the metaphors I use to describe my courses.

And this idea relates to a very particular aim that we have as the team working at the Chair for General Sociology of Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez at the University of Giessen. Among other things, we teach the introductory module for the Bachelor of Social Sciences, which means that we provide the students' first encounter with critical sociological studies. So here our task is to introduce the social sciences and we do this from a critical decolonial, feminist perspective by saying 'look, there are more perspectives than the European ones, the male- and white-centred perspectives, to look at the world.' We have a responsibility to offer ways of understanding and making sense of the world we live in. And we admit that many of our approaches just are not enough. So, we need to go beyond and offer alternative explanations. It is like opening a window for the students and telling them that there is a whole world of other knowledges and perspectives out there. And to make them understand that the world might look very different if they stick with classical European, male-centred, Eurocentric perspectives.

And of course, this connects to the idea of unlearning, because we share the same starting point with the students by trying to be humble towards all those things we do not know. I think the challenge of unlearning is something that might be suitable for more advanced courses, where you deconstruct those things you have already learned. But since we teach courses and seminars in the students' first year, we have a responsibility to transmit the idea that there are a lot of ways to look at the world and if we assume these ways, the world would look very different. And if we want to become really good social scientists it would be important to include those other perspectives or at least to know that our own perspective is very partial. This is one of the important lessons Black feminist thought (Hill Collins 2002) teaches us: that every perspective is partial, not objective, but not every perspective is privileged, and that privilege also hinders us from seeing many things.

Gulsah: Just to pick up on Sebastian's point about perspectives. One of the ways in which I try to frame the Postcolonial and Decolonial Thought course that I teach is to raise the question of what we are able to see and not see. I actually start with Hamid Dabashi's (2015) 'Can the European Read?' piece and focus on why it is that 'Europeans' continue to unsee the hierarchies of knowledge even if they do 'read' or 'engage' with postcolonial and decolonial theory. There are two dynamics that are focused upon as a continuation of that discussion; one is the linearization of postcolonial and decolonial thought and the second is what constitutes academic knowledge. The perspective you get on the relationship between subject and language from Spivak (1988), for instance, is not the same

as the perspective you get from Édouard Glissant (1997), and this is actually related to their context and experience. Spivak is writing from the experience of India and Glissant from that of the Caribbean. As such, it is important to underline the multiple, nuanced and endless debates within these thought traditions.

The second thing I like bringing in is the discussion on what academic knowledge is. The readings consist of poetry (Césaire 1983), theatre plays (Césaire 2000), paintings (for example Basquiat's 1983 painting *History of the Black People*) and songs (for example Nina Simone) in order to expand upon notions of how theorizing happens. One thing I recommend to the students is for them to pay attention to where books are located in a library or bookstore. Where Fanon is located is rarely where you will find Kant or Hegel. Frantz Fanon would generally be located under postcolonial theory and/or colonialism whereas Hegel would be classified under philosophy. It is not that the classifications are 'wrong' per se – of course Fanon can be classified under colonialism and anti-colonialism – but it is the organization of knowledge implied in that categorization whereby Fanon speaks to a specific issue or *problematique* and Hegel becomes universal knowledge.

Sebastian: I wanted to ask you, Michaela, how you frame your classes and seminars. You said you engage with the decolonial as a metaphor, but how exactly do you approach this issue for yourself and for your students?

Michaela: Good question. Difficult question. I wanted to challenge my own teaching routines with the decolonizing idea – and I will probably continue to use it this way in the future. To frame my classes or my teaching agenda I am increasingly drawing on another idea. Sebastian, you talked about 'opening a window'. I like this image. I try to do something similar in my teaching by provoking what I would call '*aha moments*'. In my experience this is one of the most interesting and enduring ways of learning. I want to make such moments possible because they are special, not only because we experience understanding something old in a new way. They are special because these moments are more than just cognitive and analytical. They are personal, in the sense that they capture us as a whole person – cognitively, emotionally, physically. Such moments could be part of a larger process that sometimes irritates and hurts – and, in my opinion, it has to.

That may sound rather abstract. As has been mentioned before, I think it's crucial to make visible which problematic norms and normalities are invisible in our society, in our everyday lives. Everyday racism in Germany is one issue I talk about a lot with my students, not least because they can connect to this directly with their experiences. Still, there isn't only one way or one best-practice/method. For me, an important starting point is to learn to think *with/through* differences (see e.g. Hall 2013a). In seminars we learn and probe how practices

of differentiation from our everyday (and scientific) practice – in unproblematic as well as problematic ways (Hall 2013b: 247). For example, I start with calling into mind some everyday life ideas of membership and belonging to more or less imagined communities (Anderson 1991) by asking the students to collect categories of difference and belonging they perceive as common or important in different settings. In the following weeks we further explore the factual social effectiveness of constructed, historically contingent differences and lines of demarcation. We question and discuss (e.g. educational, political) institutions and processes that reproduce, consolidate and/or transform and undermine certain intersectional differences and corresponding social inequalities. Throughout this process I include didactic activities from non-university educational work. For example, the exercise ‘Take a Step Forward’.² In my experience, this exercise, if carefully applied, can be used to help students to experience how certain social structures and expectations, which are often not reflected but accepted as normal and self-evident, in fact favour the progress of privileged persons or groups. On the other hand, groups of people are left behind who do not comply with ‘the norm’.

In short, I want to organize a slow learning process, week after week, connected with everyday experiences, to create spaces for ‘*aha moments*’ and further (analytical) insights. Of course, it would be great to accompany students on this journey over a longer time frame. But the first crucial, most important step for me is to kick-off a reflection process by creating or facilitating ‘*aha moments*’ and to offer some (theoretical) tools to understand and frame these experiences – to offer a language to reflect one’s social and epistemic position.

Sebastian: I can relate very well to this approach towards ‘*aha moments*’. Especially in my first years teaching introductory seminars on post- and decolonial perspectives I was very much struggling with the fact that those concerns are sometimes too abstract for German students. Just as you said, Michaela. So how do we make these perspectives more tangible?

For example, I started to introduce one session in my seminars where the students would give a very short presentation about which aspects of their everyday life are connected to (post-)colonial issues and in what way. I wanted to prompt this ‘*aha moment*’. I wanted the students to have an experience of

2 See, for example: www.coe.int/en/web/compass/take-a-step-forward (accessed 20 August 2020). In this activity participants slip into roles that vary in terms of gender, age, race, profession, sexual orientation, religion, citizenship etc. They are confronted with a list of situations or events (‘You are not afraid of being stopped by the police’, ‘You can go away on holiday once a year’, ...). Each time a person can answer ‘yes’, s*he takes a step forward. Hence, the participants move forward according to their chances and possibilities in life thereby visualising privileges.

saying: 'Wow! This has something to do with me! This has something to do with my history, with my surrounding. This is not just abstract theory from India or the Caribbean, but something that belongs to me and I have to deal with it.'

One difficulty that we have in Germany is that debates about colonialism work in such a way that the colonial is seen as something that happened elsewhere and in the past, with no contemporary relevance. So I think there is real potential in opening the classroom to these very broad, associative teaching experiments. Because in providing these spaces, the students have the possibility to relate their own heterogeneous experiences to processes of colonization and racialization and, eventually, to their critique.

I want to share just one example with you, which was quite amazing for me. There was one student who was really quiet and not really engaging in discussions. But at one session, he gave a great presentation about how current practices in the football business have colonial continuities. He sometimes wore training outfits from a local football team, so I guess this was his thing. As a teacher I am happy that he had this '*aha moment*' and do not mind if he missed the reading of Homi Bhabha, to give just a random example.

Gulsah: Just to try to pick up on what was mentioned about everyday lives. In the course I teach on Race and Racism, we get more into everyday lives in terms of how they are socialized into racist institutions and the privileges they have.³ What I usually do with the students in the first week is to ask them to write on a piece of paper (that I will never see) whether or not they think they have ever been racist. At the end of the course I ask them the question again, most of them don't write but just start talking about it, so they become more open to acknowledging their privileges.

Michaela: There is a (German) text that I often give to my students to read – for several reasons. It is from ManuEla Ritz (2015) and it is called 'An anti-racism workshop between two book covers' (*Ein Rassismusworkshop zwischen zwei Buchdeckeln*). As the title reveals, the text invites the reader to attend a fictitious workshop setting. The reader follows the discussion among the other participants and is 'listening' to the input of the workshop trainer, who is the author of the text. Even more important, one is asked to pause reading, reflect and participate in small exercises.

I mention this because I believe we should consider alternatives to classical academic texts in our reading lists. Gulsah, you mentioned the hierarchies of knowledge. I think teachers could and should resort to 'alternative' text genres

3 It needs to be underlined that the make-up of the seminars is predominantly white.

as well as a variety of media formats. There is another reason why I consider the contribution of ManuEla Ritz a promising example. In my opinion, the university is a difficult or at least very special context to talk and learn about racism, for example. I really want to talk about personal experiences and how each of us is part of a racist system. And we do so. Nonetheless, the university is a very hierarchical environment steeped in power. I am the teacher and I give grades, and so on. It's not the same as in non-university settings of political education, where you work with small groups, in a safe space (at best). University teaching is different. Therefore, you must be cautious how (not) to talk about certain issues. The written workshop of ManuEla Ritz offers a thoughtful organized, albeit individual experience that encourages students to enter an on-going learning process, which might not be located at the university.

Sebastian: Before we come to an end, I want to raise one aspect, which I would like to know if, and how, we share it. In the discussions we have had so far, teaching seems to be an inherently political or transformative process. In that sense, I wanted to ask you if you see your teaching as a political act and if so, to what extent?

Gulsah: I do agree with bell hooks' (2014: 12) statement that the 'classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy.' Rather than the writing or the publishing maybe the most radical space is the classroom and what we can do with it.

There is always the logic that people who teach the stuff we do are bringing in politics. But politics was already there when everyone was teaching the very 'objective science' and we are just being honest about it. I teach Race and Racism, Gender and Sexuality and there are sometimes objections from students that I teach a very 'political course' but it is important to make clear to students that Introduction to Political Science is also political. We just hide the politics there and I am being more honest about it.

Michaela: I totally agree with you, Gulsah. And I really like the idea you just shared with us. This reminds me of the task to make invisible norms visible. I sometimes use the example of gender-inclusive or gender-sensitive language to illustrate this. Many people in German-speaking regions object to using gendered language. For me the crucial point is that we do not *start* to gender! Our supposedly gender-neutral (German) language had and still has a masculine gender. Thereby, the masculine is the norm, whose particularity can remain invisible – or – has been invisible for the longest time – with the resulting exclusionary effects for the other, allegedly co-addressed genders. Similarly, it is not only that teaching or research is political that is overtly or self-consciously framed as political. Even supposedly neutral or objective research is political, at least in the sense

that it uncritically reproduces existing, thereby often problematic norms and normalities.

Sebastian: While I completely share your thoughts on the classroom being always and inevitably political, I still wonder if our teaching isn't also directly aimed at political transformation or social change in a very broad way? I am not talking about political agendas here, but I have the impression that in our seminars it is not just about grading students, right?

The classroom and the experiences connected to learning have both political and transformative potential. And when we teach political issues, we have outreach beyond the classroom, as long as the students engage in the debate. For example, one student gave me really positive feedback by saying that she learned much more than she needed to obtain the grade or to pass the module. Instead, she had learned something which is important outside of the classroom. She mentioned that she continued the discussions from our seminar about racism or colonial continuities with friends and flatmates and those things were suddenly part of everyday conversations. I am still very thankful for that feedback and very much like the idea of having an impact outside or beyond the classroom instead of limiting my agency to giving grades.

In that sense, how are you aiming to, if you do so, to politicize the classroom? What kind of impact do you think your teaching has beyond awarding a grade? And what kind of changes have you experienced so far?

Gulsah: I do get similar comments in terms of the class being transformative and that after class they continue the discussion for two, three more hours. Because they get very involved in it and realize things about themselves and sometimes, they don't want to say them to me, but they discuss it amongst themselves much more openly. The aim is to be transformative! What I tell the class at the beginning is that the aim is to end the course questioning whatever was taught to them as being clear-cut, having more questions than answers and becoming uncomfortable about what they know and where they think they belong.

Michaela: Yes, and this is exactly the point where an enduring learning process can start. The question of transformation: For me, it is also very satisfying when my teaching has a political or transformative impact, in the sense that students start to think and talk differently about some issues and their position in society and share their thoughts with others. For example, I taught aspiring schoolteachers in their first semester at university about, for example, racism and questions of social inequalities reproduced by educational structures and practices. The feedback of many students suggests that some of them experienced a kind of

'aha moment'. This was very fulfilling for me because I just felt like I was really leaving a trace that could later have an impact on their teaching practice. It was like a training of multipliers. With social scientists one doesn't know exactly what they will do after university.

Gulsah: Our conversation has ended with the awareness that there are many more issues we could touch upon but, many that we ourselves might be able to 'unsee' at the moment and in the future as participants of unlearning. The conversation did clarify and aid in elaborating on a couple of dynamics that we all thought were central to discussions of how to teach the world. As the subtitle of the piece demonstrates, two conceptual tools came forward: decolonization and unlearning. The conversation initially focused on what we understand from these concepts on a more abstract level and the difficulties associated with using them indiscriminately or without reflection. The conversation then focused on how we 'practice' decolonization or unlearning when we teach. These examples of different approaches to teaching were important for the more abstract discussion as well as for underlining how practices of unlearning need not be uniform and can vary across time and space based on what it is that is being unlearned or decolonized. This led us back to the discussion on the relationship between politics and teaching which was a very important part of the conversation when discussing how to define decolonization as well. The aim is to be transformative and without the politics behind it these concepts can easily become synonyms for diversity and as such the transformative agenda and the transformations we are seeking need to be underlined further. The conversation, as all good conversations, is on-going, as is the process of unlearning. Reflecting on our teaching practices has demonstrated that there are different ways to approach this process and we need to continue having conversations and unlearn.

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