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Document Version
Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (Harvard):
Rojas Gaviria, PX & Preece, C 2023, 'Decolonising the academic atmospheres of higher education', *Education in Practice*, vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 38-47. <<https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/as/hefi/research-scholarship-development/scholarship-teaching-learning/hefi-journal/index.aspx#issues>>

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Decolonising the academic atmospheres of higher education

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Abstract

When working on reflective essay assignments, students are challenged with performing sophisticated introspections, mastering theories and developing critical thinking skills. Furthermore, they can struggle with procrastination as they seek to express their own voice and nourish their creativity during the reflective process. This philosophical think-piece draws on our experience teaching marketing-related modules at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. It illustrates how, by conceptualising the learning experience as an academic encounter within affective educational atmospheres, we, as educators, can offer students tangible and actionable tools to overcome some of the challenges of reflective learning. Affective atmospheres in educational settings can be understood as spaces (within and outside campus) in which peers and facilitators encounter each other in their learning journeys. We argue that pedagogical strategies often take our spaces of learning for granted, not recognising their significance on the learning experience. We propose that nurturing affective atmospheres requires recognition and cultivation. This paper illustrates how, within the context of the Business School, incorporating guided embodied experiences can impact students' capacities to work regularly, collectively, creatively, and reflectively.

Current academic atmospheres and pedagogical challenges

COVID-19 has pushed us to rethink our most precious academic habits and environments (Bryson and Andres, 2020). It has necessitated the creation of virtual academic atmospheres at a time of anxiety, when many families have struggled to juggle work, childcare and home life during lockdown. Isolated study has significantly impacted on many students' social connections and mental health (Catling *et al.*, 2022). In addition to this global upheaval, social movements such as Black Lives Matter have fed into educational debate around white

privilege, free speech, and decolonisation, leading to questions such as "why is my curriculum white?" (Peters, 2015). These political moments have sparked significant controversy and prompted urgent action to build a more diverse, reflective, creative, and inclusive academic environment for all.

Affective atmospheres and embodied education

Academic atmospheres can be understood as being continuously in formation, ephemeral, and dependent on the collective mood. They thus affect (and are in turn affected by) all those within them, including learners and teachers. In this sense,

“atmospheres are perpetually forming and deforming, appearing and disappearing, as bodies enter into relation with one another. They are never finished, static or at rest” (Anderson, 2009, p. 79).

This theory recognises that *“understanding is profoundly embodied, insofar as our conceptualization and reasoning recruit sensory, motor, and affective patterns and processes to structure our understanding of, and engagement with, our world”* (Johnson, 2015, p. 1). At the same time, this embodied understanding is political (Ahmed, 2014), meaning that certain bodies may hold privileges or feel welcome in certain atmospheres while others may not. While having ice breakers in teaching sessions is common practice, this paper highlights a deeper need to understand how learners (and educators) land in these academic atmospheres at a more existential level (Preece *et al.*, 2022).

In theorising academic atmospheres, we seek to challenge Western, Cartesian views of the world when supporting our students with their learning journeys and reflective assignments within the context of the Business School, and consider calls for decolonising the curriculum and authentic assessments. A separation between the ‘mind-intellect’ and ‘body-spirit’ still dominates within our academic practices and assessments (Ng, 2018), albeit with some disciplinary differences. While embodied pedagogy - the incorporation of multi-sensorial and imaginative learning techniques involving the body - in business schools has only recently started to emerge (Berti *et al.*, 2021), education of the body has been considered a

rich pedagogic practice in other disciplines such as the arts or sports (Albright, 2011). One way to help students understand and construct insightful knowledge is to support their process of connecting with theories, questions and learning from a more embodied perspective. Different embodied techniques can support this journey of becoming reflective practitioners in the process of knowledge creation, offering opportunities to explore various perspectives, handle complexity and uncertainty, increase their understanding of self, others, and community, and question received truths - all valuable skills in today's world.

Tadajewski (2022) highlights the importance of reflexivity in acknowledging the complexity of learners' personal biographies and experiences, the affordances of the environment, and the power relations between educators and learners, and learners themselves. Critical reflection entails an interconnection of self and world: looking outwards, locating theories and practices within their social, political, and cultural contexts, as well as looking inwards to challenge the processes by which one makes sense of the world (Door, 2014). Critical reflection involves questioning one's own experiences and orientations (Ahmed, 2014) and seeking alternative ways of seeing and doing, allowing for a potentially emancipatory shift in subjectivity. To create new understandings, this reflective process must, we argue, acknowledge the body of the learners and their orientations to academic atmospheres i.e., whether they feel they fit in or identify as misfits.

In bringing reflexivity into assessment as well as teaching, educators can create reflective spaces in which students can understand their subject positioning in the world. For instance, we know not all students sit equally within assignments, with some feeling more confident and reassured than others. Angu (2019) looks at the context of literacy in first-year students at a South African University, where analysing a 'personal literacy narrative assignment' demonstrates that assignments should not be seen as an objective evaluation of writing skills. Rather, assignments reveal vivid representations of "*the scholastic experiences of university students from a schooling system that marginalised and silenced the voices of those categorised by the same system as subalterns*" (Angu, 2019, p. 1160). This highlights how such reflexivity might lead to a contentious view of non-traditional assessment methods, as educators are in a position where they can judge the learner's innermost

thoughts (Schutz, 2013). However, we argue that assessment is always a judgement of the quality of students' learning and is inextricably caught up within power relations and hierarchies that exist in educational institutions.

Angu's research resonates with our own experience working with international students, who currently form a significant proportion of the UK student population. Through our academic journeys, we have seen students struggle to find their contribution to collective learning. One particular challenge consists of students' doubting whether their non-western references or theorists could support their understanding of a specific subject. In other cases, non-native speakers feel othered, even in cases of language fluency (Halic, Greenberg and Paulus, 2009). These challenges are based on the dominant presence, often unconscious, of the canonical theories and theoreticians to which we are habituated as knowledge creation keepers. In the UK, we have witnessed many non-native English speakers trying to fit in a model designed with English natives and Western students in mind (for instance, the essay-writing routine is harrowing). This situation creates additional challenges for those with the 'wrong bodies' and indeed those who have the 'wrong language'. For example, at the Business School, one of the challenges we face is understanding and supporting our BAME (Black, Asian, Minority, Ethnic) students who, independently of being home or international students, often perform less well than other students, a situation which is of course found across the sector (Mcduff *et al.*, 2018).

One of the pillars to better understand the challenges of improving our learning environment is to increase our understanding of how our students land in the affective atmospheres of our pedagogical routines (Preece *et al.*, 2022). The biographies and the subject positionings we occupy through our individual embodied experience in the world define our experience and emotions, making us feel adequate and at ease, or uncomfortable (Preece *et al.*, 2022). It is clear that for some students, this process can be uncomfortable. One of the limitations of traditional education is that it prioritises a disembodied understanding of topics via the passive attendance of a set of lectures. Theories of affect seek to understand how our bodies are directed through repetition into normalised routines which help determine us as specific affective subjects (Bajde and Rojas-

Gaviria, 2021). This affective subject creation sometimes reduces our potentialities and our capacities to create, be, and feel in diverse ways. In Sarah Ahmed's words:

"It is not, then, that bodies simply have a direction, or that they follow directions, in moving this way or that. Rather, in moving this way rather than that, and moving in this way again and again, the surfaces of bodies *in turn* acquire their shape. Bodies are 'directed' and they take the shape of this direction" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 15-16).

A pedagogical embodied perspective offers an invitation to investigate this discomfort and make it productive and exciting for our own learning and the learning of students (Ng, 2018).

Embodied pedagogy and disciplinary boundaries

Mindful attention to embodied experiences in educational practice has demonstrated potential in allowing students to ideate and theorise in alternative ways, often moving away from hegemonic discourses (Orr, 2002). Ergas and Hadar's work demonstrates how mindfulness offers stress-reduction benefits to students and helps them to challenge normalised versions of what education should look like (Ergas and Hadar, 2021). Ng (2018) also reflects on how her presence in the classroom as an Asian woman provokes both contestation and admiration. She emphasises that "*it is indeed the encounter of bodies, not only of intellect, that gives dynamism to the process of teaching and learning*" (Ng, 2018, p. 36). Ng argues that her embodied approach recognises the learning each of us can generate when being in intimate communion with our own body. She sees, in this sense, "*embodied learning as a form of decolonising pedagogy*" (Ng, 2018, p. 50).

Albright (2011) also reflects on decades of experience in teaching choreography and dance through movement. Her reflections reveal how the communitarian programme she has designed, "Girls in Motion", has provided students with an embodied understanding of the transformational power of dance. Her students work with a group of middle school girls in an after-school activity. During this experience they discover as a collective that "*how we move in the world can make a difference*" (Albright, 2011, p. 10), and this activity results in

increased self-confidence and creativity. Ng and Albright's experiences demonstrate that embodied techniques can help students get involved in their learning at a more profound level, allowing them to discover their voice, the particularities of their lived experience and their subject positioning within the learning community.

One could argue that the business context is less compatible or less susceptible to enrichment by adopting an embodied perspective than the examples above. However, Gordon's (2014) contribution to the debate on decolonising education argues that we should be going beyond challenging the content within the curriculum to rethinking our disciplinary learning assumptions. His work invites bravery in thinking unconventionally when pushing the boundaries of our pedagogical practice if we are to genuinely decolonise the learning experience. Gordon's (2014) approach starts by identifying our tendency to work within a particular taxonomy of disciplines, each with their own specific methods of learning. He highlights that due to "disciplinary decadence", we become trapped in our disciplinary paradigms, which prevents exploring other ways of knowing and, therefore, any radical transformation.

Embodiment in the Business School: some examples

In our own practice, conversations with students have highlighted that what they find helpful and inspirational resides in the power of physical and contemplative tasks that they can use to understand their embodied experiences better. For example, in the framework of a module on consumer behaviour, exploring different environmental conditions (such as different lighting or sound effects) can elucidate different narratives that come from the sensorial experiences of certain marketplaces and servicescapes. In experimentations of this technique by the first author, students successfully integrated narratives about sensorial elements of retail spaces and the consequences of those sensorial conditions on themselves as consumers. As different students evoked different experiences, pleasant or unpleasant, and acknowledged their assorted conditionings, the discussions around these topics reflected the diversity of the participants' backgrounds. This diversity allowed for a more empathic understanding of the design of sensorial elements in retail spaces and their impact on different users. As acknowledged by Anderson (2016), it is within the affective

encounters, the collective interactions, that we can, in the long run, re-shape the affective atmospheres in which we work.

Another example of an embodied activity is a combination of poetry with meditation. Poetic meditations prepare the body to appreciate a more metaphorical understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. These techniques are ideal in the context of preparing the students for data collection. In marketing research modules, this data collection can be from others via observing and interviewing or from themselves via self-observation / introspection:

"by using mindfulness practice as a means to relax and focus on sensations, ethnographers can prepare for a more truly embodied data collection where they become a 'sensorium', an instrument of research who is able to gather data from multiple environmental sources, including, but not limited to the visual and textual" (Rojas-Gaviria and Canniford, 2022, p. 8).

The poetic aspect complements this multisensorial openness by enriching the activity with a metaphorical purpose. Metaphors are known to operate as frames for academic work (O'Malley and Ryan, 2006), leveraging familiar, concrete reference points in order to develop nuanced understandings of novel and challenging constructs. This metaphorical understanding stimulates the students to engage in deeper levels of data analysis. Let us suppose, for instance, that we are preparing the terrain for students to conduct an inventory of their wardrobe or their fridge. This is an exercise that can be fruitful for understanding consumer behaviours. Through poetry, students can be transported into new understandings about their ordinary belongings, making the familiar unfamiliar, and allowing for an insight into how material objects gain meaning and value. An extract of a potentially useful poem for this case is, for instance, *Our House*, by Safia Khan:

“The fridge is full of disappointing surprises,
like pilau rice in ice cream tubes, and
hand grenades in cling film.
[...]”

(Khan, 2021)

As illustrated by research and our experience with students, more careful attention to how we are affected and affect others through our embodied experience of learning and teaching can support our programme of decolonising the academic atmospheres in which we work. Students, for instance, participate with their own inventories of home artefacts or products, and their descriptions are enriched via a metaphorical vocabulary that can be learned from poetry coming from different cultural horizons. In conversations, a mosaic of perspectives is enacted, giving the students an embodied understanding of the diversity of consumers and consumption habits that are possible.

These practices denote a more malleable vision of pedagogical strategies. This malleable pedagogy is an open invitation to other disciplines beyond business to expand their horizons to consider unconventional pedagogical methods to enrich the learning experience and nourish spaces of innovation. These spaces celebrate an interdisciplinary dialogue and highlight the need for educators to come together for the creation of pedagogy across disciplinary boundaries. One example of this is the edited work by Tatiana Chemi and Alison Neilson (2022) in their collective exploration of using the arts for teaching in non-arts programmes. This European project offers alternative teaching practices through the arts and suggests concrete examples and methodologies that can be of use in any field.

While the spectrum of such techniques is very broad and may include experiences such as inspiration walks, collages, focus exercises, poetry reading, poetic meditations, podcasting, dancing, and prototyping, this article has focused on only a few examples for brevity. We ask for an opening of our academic atmospheres to allow for cross-pollination of what we often see as separate disciplinary islands in the world of academia. This also requires a

student-centric approach, acknowledging difference and how it is experienced and felt within educational spaces (both physical and virtual).

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