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COMMENTARY

“Decolonial Pedagogies.Space”: Youth-led, Open-source Instructional Design as Experiential Learning and Meta-pedagogical Empowerment

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Abstract

This commentary describes a pedagogical experiment in youth-led, open-source learning design carried out between Autumn 2022 and Spring 2023 while I was teaching in the University of Chicago’s Colonizations sequence. “Colonizations” is one among several sequences that undergraduate students can elect to take to satisfy their College Core requirement in “Civilization Studies.” Using an iterative “Design a Learning Module” assignment sequence – comprising both a mid-quarter and final submission together with an in-class introduction to principles of curriculum design – I structured the learning pathway to achieve three outcomes: first, to create experiential learning opportunities for students to engage with curriculum design principles through the hands-on creation of an online learning module; second, to expose students to open-source, creative-commons alternatives to dominant, colonial forms of proprietary knowledge; and last, to provide students with tools to analyze, interpret, and navigate their future learning environments.

Keywords: decolonial pedagogies; learning design; experiential learning; meta-pedagogy

Introduction

Between Autumn 2022 and Spring 2023, 20 students at the University of Chicago designed open-source learning modules for an online platform, “Decolonial Pedagogies.” The learning modules were completed as the final assignment for a course titled *Asia-Pacific Colonizations* (later retitled *Imperial Expansion, Anti-Imperialism, and Nation in Asia* by my department). My course was one in a three-part sequence in “Colonizations” studies, which is in turn one among several sequences that students could elect to take to satisfy their College Core requirement in “Civilization Studies” at the university.¹ Although the class is a regular offering

¹ As described in the University of Chicago’s College Catalogue:

taught by a rotating cast of instructors, individual instructors are given wide leeway to develop their syllabi.

In this commentary, I briefly outline my process for developing the “Design a Learning Module” assignment series before describing the assignment’s structure and scaffolding and reflecting on learning outcomes, limitations, and considerations for educators working in institutions that are not over-resourced, elite private colleges and universities. The student-created learning modules can be found at <http://decolonialpedagogies.space/> and are available for non-commercial use and adaptation with attribution under a Creative Commons 4.0 license (CC BY-NC 4.0).

Background and Motivations

My “Design a Learning Module” assignments originally began as a “Revise the Syllabus” final assignment option when I first taught *Asia-Pacific Colonizations* in late 2022. Through this earlier assignment, students were invited to replace two to three weeks of content on my syllabus with materials of their choosing. Each learning material was to be accompanied by a brief description and explanation of the selection process, sequencing, and intended contributions to the overall learning outcomes of the Colonizations class. This “Revise the Syllabus” assignment was itself adapted from an “Addendum to the Syllabus” assignment that anthropologist Kesha Fikes had offered in 2010, which I learned about from a syllabus that was included in a course repository shared with new Colonizations instructors. Fikes’s assignment had been framed as an “Addendum,” with students proposing three additional weeks of content, while I opted to frame the assignment as a revision to prompt students to

Civilization studies provide an in-depth examination of the development and accomplishments of one of the world’s great civilizations through direct encounters with significant and exemplary documents and monuments. These sequences complement the literary and philosophical study of texts central to the humanities sequences, as well as the study of synchronous social theories that shape basic questions in the social science sequences. Their approach stresses the grounding of events and ideas in historical context and the interplay of events, institutions, ideas, and cultural expressions in social change. The courses emphasize texts rather than surveys as a way of getting at the ideas, cultural patterns, and social pressures that frame the understanding of events and institutions within a civilization. And they seek to explore a civilization as an integrated entity, capable of developing and evolving meanings that inform the lives of its citizens (The College 2022, retrieved 3 June 2023 from <http://collegecatalog.uchicago.edu/thecollege/civilizationstudies/>).

A full description of the history of Civilization studies is both unnecessary to and beyond the scope of the present commentary, but attentive readers will note the treatment of “civilizations” as relatively discrete, bounded entities that can be studied one by one to understand their “development and accomplishments.” Further, it is not stated what qualifies “one civilization” for membership among the “world’s great[s],” though the regular offerings implicitly suggest the bounds of this category. As admittedly apocryphal departmental lore has it, the Colonizations sequence was founded as a response to the bounded, one-great-civilization model of the Civilization studies core, emphasizing the centrality of colonization and ongoing colonial dynamics to the making of the modern world and the concept of civilization itself, emphasizing dynamics of mutual (if unequal) contact, connection, and exchange.

reflect on which materials they had found least compelling on my syllabus and why, before working to design alternatives that they found more personally exciting, broadly significant, etc.

The results of my preliminary experiment were spectacular – creatively imagined, deeply researched, and thoughtfully sequenced – to the point that I thought it a shame they were not readily shareable. Not readily shareable because, on the one hand, I had not obtained student consent in advance and was unsuccessful in doing so after the summer break had started. On the other hand, my “revision” framing had positioned the student’s learning materials as being in dialogue with my syllabus, not as something that could stand on their own. Finally, I realized that, by offering this option only as one among many final assignment options, students had to do everything at once: not only familiarizing themselves with principles of online curriculum and learning-experience design but also researching, selecting, and justifying materials all in a one- to two-week timespan.

My decision to shift the assignment from a “revision” to a freestanding “learning module” was also inspired by my concurrent engagements with external organizations. During the academic term in question, I also worked with a couple of U.S.-based nonprofits to develop youth-focused and youth-driven learning resources. These included the youth-designed and -led Evokate guide to mental health social action (available at evokateapp.org), created as a partnership among Active Minds, the Well Being Trust, and Young Invincibles and the Global Nomads Group’s Content Creation Lab, which convened a global group of 33 youth interns to design an environmental justice unit for California middle schoolers that bridged state curriculum standards with Indigenous ways of knowing. These projects also resulted in spectacular learning materials and learning pathways created by learners who had no previous experience in content creation or learning experience design, which further inspired me to redesign my assignment as an experiential learning opportunity for creating learning materials by youth, for youth.

In my second iteration of *Asia-Pacific Colonizations*, I redesigned the assignment to be divided into phases, comprising an initial midterm assignment that culminated in a final learning module, both of which were offered as one among a suite of assignment options at both the midterm and final stages (students were given the option of choosing a more traditional college essay and were also informed about “off-ramps” for changing their minds in the future). The learning pathway for the new “Design a Learning Module” assignment was structured around three outcomes: first, to create experiential learning opportunities for students to engage with curriculum design principles through the hands-on creation of an online learning module; second, to expose students to open-source, creative-commons alternatives to dominant, colonial forms of proprietary knowledge; and last, to provide students with tools to more effectively analyze, interpret, and navigate their future learning.

I also found that the redesigned assignment better aligned with my own teaching philosophy as inspired by bell hooks' approach to "education as a practice of freedom" in *Teaching to Transgress* (1994). Taking up hooks's call to advance learner empowerment by repositioning them away from the hegemonic, subordinate-learner status commonly enforced in our institution, I instead sought to create conditions in which learners were actively supported in the process of (re)imagining themselves as teachers and experience designers. The multi-part, hands-on learning process was thus aimed at building student awareness of the pedagogy of pedagogy: in other words, recognizing that, in all moments of pedagogy, learners are always learning more than "content" – they are also learning what it means to learn (Ergas 2017, 125; see also Chapter 5, "Pedagogy and Meta-pedagogy"). Through the "Design a Learning Module" assignment, I thus worked to direct meta-pedagogical attention in two directions: first, explicitly toward others by inviting students to imagine learners for whom they wanted to create the conditions for specific learning experiences and outcomes; and second, implicitly toward themselves by prompting them to disaggregate and reflect critically on the learning experiences that have and have not worked for them in the past, thereby to give them tools for intervening in (where possible), selecting, and creating opportunities for learning in ways that were more aligned with their future goals and needs.

Assignment Structure, Scaffolding, Assessment, and Futures

In this section, I further discuss the structure and scaffolding of the "Design a Learning Module" assignment sequence. The sequence comprised two parts: a midterm submission, where students submitted a "Statement of Purpose, Audience, and Learning Objectives" for their intended future learning module; and a final "Design a Learning Module" submission, where students expanded on their midterm submission by including learning materials, a recruiting pitch, statement of the module's structure, and a biography. I provided comments, questions, and suggestions following the midterm submissions, including – where relevant – suggestions about specific learning materials to check out in advance of the final submission. Before the final submission, I also notified students that, after the final, my role would transition from "instructor" to "editor," meaning that I would work with them to revise the content at the level of form, thereby making it as informative and easy-to-navigate as possible on the online platform. Students submitted their modules to me directly – including written content, hyperlinks, and high-resolution files for any non-written materials – and I built the modules' pages on the website myself.

Before students submitted their midterm "Statement of Purpose, Audience, and Learning Objectives," I dedicated in-class time to introduce principles of curriculum and learning-experience design. In a mini-lecture, I gave a high-level overview of the difference between a learning experience's purpose and focus (what will it be about versus what will it do?); structure and outcomes (what will happen during versus what will ideally happen after as a result?); and audiences and module types (who is it for – getting as specific as

possible – and what do those audiences want/need?). I made the principles available on our course's Canvas site for students to revisit as they completed their midterm assignments, along with further resources for anyone interested in taking a deeper dive, but it was also important to me to introduce the principles verbally during in-class time rather than expecting that all students would be able to best engage with the concepts by reading or that students would have time to engage with optional-but-not-actually-optional off-syllabus resources on their own time.

When I first made the "Design a Learning Module" assignment available as an option in Spring 2022, I also set aside in-class time for a collaborative discussion about the structure of our online platform and any centralized resources that students thought would be helpful to make available as a separate web page, rather than expecting each person to reinvent the wheel by (re)defining shared terms or concepts. Coming out of this discussion, we reformulated a set of resources based on material from my syllabus and course readings which ended up housed on the site's homepage and "Keywords" page. Before the midterm submission, I also prepared a low-resolution wireframe for students to visualize the platform as they developed their learning modules, together with two sample modules of my own creation to serve as concrete models for students who would find these helpful. When I offered the class and assignment sequence again in subsequent quarters, I replaced my mock examples with the live "Decolonial Pedagogies" platform.

In line with the approach to pedagogy outlined by bell hooks in *Teaching to Transgress*, all the modules were evaluated based on completion. Rather than acting as if there is a clear "correct" or "incorrect" way to design a learning module and assigning letter grades accordingly, all submissions received full credit upon submission. In this way, I framed my written feedback on their midterm and final submissions as an open-ended dialogue that continued after the final submissions as well. After submitting their final materials, student submissions were returned with proposed copyedits and further notes about new or ongoing disjunctures I felt I noticed among different components of the module, along with one or more suggestions for ways they might resolve the disjunctures. Students were given a reply-by date and invited to respond or make further revisions based on the final feedback. They were also given instructions on what to do if they wanted to delay the posting process or adjust – even unpublish – the modules in the future.

Because the content is not time-sensitive or responsive, there is virtually no maintenance required to ensure that they are kept up-to-date. I do not have fine-grained audience metrics for the platform, but to date, there have been 1,435 unique visits, and 37% of visitors stay for 16 minutes or more – which might not seem like long, but this is significantly better than the cross-industry average of 52 seconds per pageview on informational sites. I have also successfully introduced the modules to groups of students working on curriculum design projects at my current university and, at least anecdotally, they have found the modules to be an exciting and compelling model to think with and a repository of learning materials to explore. In the future, I plan to share the platform with

groups like the Decolonial Studies Network which might not only take inspiration from and build on the concept, but also share the modules with their networks.

Conclusions

Following each of the quarters in which the assignment was offered, students shared positive feedback about the experience of creating their learning modules, noting that they enjoyed the challenge of thinking concretely about *whom* they wanted to engage in the modules and *how*. They further stated that their research skills had been enhanced by the process of researching materials as well as selecting and sequencing them in the final module. Additionally, students shared that they appreciated the opportunity to take a deeper dive into topics that they had been interested in but had been unable to explore in-depth due to the constraints of the nine-week term and the inherently selective character of all syllabi and learning experiences. Moreover, students shared that they had been intrigued to learn about Creative Commons licenses and were excited for others to be able to use their modules since they had not previously been exposed to the idea of open-source materials in the social sciences, humanities, and non-tech fields.

As I noted in the introduction, several caveats are in order, most importantly the fact that, as I have designed it, the assignment relies on small class sizes, light teaching loads, and access to resources – most proximally money, but also expertise and experience that are not a common baseline for educators and academic professionals. None of my classes had enrollments higher than 25 students, and on average 20% of my students overall opted to design learning modules (the remainder of the students opted to write research papers or comparative essays). This meant that I was only giving feedback and editorial support on five learning modules per term, which afforded me a unique depth of engagement in the modules' creation. I also taught only three classes per term while carrying out this experiment, of which one or two were Colonizations classes. Finally, the web platform required money to host and build. We could have used a free option provided through our university (a privilege in itself), but it would have come with significant drawbacks in terms of flexibility in design, structure/navigation, etc. Had the paid option not been available, I would have had to design the assignment and final platform differently.

Finally, I have extensive nonacademic work experience in learning-experience design and online learning, together with experience gained through both prior and ongoing work as a developmental editor, UX/UI designer, marketing-communications professional, and digital content creator. Together, these enabled me to keep more parts of the process "in-house," for instance, building the learning modules myself at a rate of 10–15 minutes per page rather than longer. If I had not been able to do much of the work on my own – and to do it efficiently and effectively without requiring a steep learning curve and/or an exorbitant input of time due to a lack of experience in scope management – I could have either sunk an unreasonable amount of time into this project or would have needed to seek additional support. This could have taken the form of an (ideally paid) undergraduate or

graduate student assistant or support from other units, like the university's web services. Working with a team is not just a caveat or drawback, of course: in future iterations of similar experiments, I also intend to recruit teams of individuals keen to build their knowledge of editing and/or web content creation and use this as a team professionalization opportunity.

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