

Pedagogies for Social Justice

Moonisah Usman

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Interviewer – Italics

Interviewee – Normal

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Thank you for tuning in to the Pedagogies for Social Justice podcast, brought to you by a student-staff partnership at the University of Westminster. This is a platform for students and educators to exchange knowledge and encourage discussion about the current challenges facing higher education. I'm your host, Kyra, and, for this episode, I'll be in conversation with Moonisah Usman, a lecturer at the Centre for Education & Teaching Innovation at Westminster. Moonisah also has an academic background in the Life Sciences, but generally has a strong commitment to biomedical research, student partnership, and supporting foundation learning. In this interview, we discuss the Students as Co-Creators programme, de-colonial and anti-racist approaches to biomedical research, and how we might begin to de-colonise the Life Sciences.

Hi Moonisah. Thank you so much for joining me on this episode of the podcast. It is so good to have you here today.

Thank you, Kyra. I'm very excited to be here and to have this conversation with you. You've had some very experienced people and people that I look up to and I'm inspired by on this podcast, so I'm feeling quite nervous but also very privileged to be here [laughing] – thank you.

So, I like to start off the podcast with the guests telling us a little bit more about themselves. So, first things first, where are you from?

So, I grew up...was born and grew up in London. I spent all my time learning in London, so primary school, secondary school, and also my higher education was in London. My background, my parents are Pakistani. I've visited Pakistan a few times, and I think, in growing up in London, we've still had a big influence of Pakistan in our lives. The culture has been brought into the home by our parents and it's something that we still, you know, we live by a lot of that culture still and it's fantastic. So, yes, that's where I'm from!

Amazing, thank you. And what is your role here at Westminster?

So, I am a lecturer in the Centre for Education & Teaching Innovation. My primary role as a lecturer is to lead the foundation core module – it's called Critical Thinking for Academic & Professional Development, and it's core for all foundation university students, regardless of discipline, so we have students from the Business School, Arts & Media, Social Sciences, Life Sciences, Humanities and Law studying this module. And then, besides that, the other things that I'm sort of involved with in the CETI is partnership, so I've spent a long time working with Dr Jennifer Fraser on the Students as Co-Creators programme, but now I do...I'm not so much involved in terms of how that runs anymore, but I've been doing lots of partnership research with the colleagues and the students that I work with. And some of my other research is related to my background in Biomedical Sciences, so I have a PhD in Obesity in Genetics, and that shapes some of the scientific research that I still do, even though I'm based in the CETI.

And what would you say has been kind of the highlight of your career so far?

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That's a very difficult question [laughing]! I think it's a hard one, maybe because... partly because I am still very early in my career, so I've had the experience of doing my PhD and then I've been in the role that I am for about two years now, and I've had other sort of teaching and learning experiences whilst doing my PhD, but I think one of the highlights would be the publication of my PhD work. It is really nice to see all that hard work, all that time gone in, really contribute to something. It was just published last week in the International Journal of Obesity, so that was a great moment.

But also, something that has sort of been a highlight throughout my career, from very early on becoming a researcher to now, has been the opportunity to work with students and to work with such wonderful colleagues like Jennifer, whom I've learnt so much from. We've just had lots of critical thinking conversations about learning and teaching, and I feel very privileged to be able to have those conversations and to do that work alongside my Science research.

Of course. Thank you for that. Congratulations on your publication – that is amazing and great news.

Thank you.

So, in the preface of your most recent work, which you were just mentioning before, it's called 'Dreaming to Learn Together – Lessons in De-Colonial and Anti-Racist Partnership Practices', and you've co-written that with Jennifer Fraser, you talk about student-staff partnership generally before discussing why it's important for it to be, as you say, situated as explicitly anti-racist, de-colonial practices, and spaces in which we collectively uplift and magnify the voices of [?] students and staff. But my first question is: what makes working in partnership with students particularly kind of important to you, and what inspired you to kind of take your work on this path?

So, working in partnership, for me, the experience that I've had is that it can really disrupt the hierarchy and the power dynamic that exists in traditional classrooms, and I find that hierarchy and that power dynamic is often a barrier to engaging students and to working in innovative and inclusive ways. So, what I really like about working in partnership, from my experience of doing this with students, is how it places an emphasis on students' knowledge, on their experiences, what they're passionate about and what they know, and that makes the learning and teaching more relevant and it makes it more joyful for everyone that's involved. So, for me, the partnership work that I've done with Jennifer and facilitating the Co-Creators programme, then that really made it sort of a no-brainer that, once I had my own module, I would do everything I could to have co-creation in there, and so, when I inherited the Critical Thinking module at the beginning of 2020, it was a priority for me to ensure that several aspects of that were co-created with students, that we had...we were thinking through together how the curriculum would be taught, what would be included, what the assessments would be like, and I think that there's still so much work to be done, even in just my module, in terms of partnership and how it becomes a more day-to-day thing in the module when we're actually running seminars and doing lectures and giving feedback to students on their coursework.

Have you found that students have kind of recognised the change in your approach to teaching and learning?

I think that one thing that I always sort of noticed in my classrooms, and I think it does come down to this...this ethos of partnership or this desire that I have to work in partnership, is that I do have really good relationships with my students, so I often get very positive feedback on what's been taught in the session but also I have lots of contacts with students, and students, although I'm not their personal tutor, will often contact me and share very personal things, and I think that's because of the working together and the relationships that we've developed through working together. They see me as someone who is approachable and understandable, and that's why they can talk to me about things that they feel maybe less comfortable talking to other people about.

Mm, no, that's amazing. And, like you were just speaking about, whilst being a lecturer in the CETI and obviously a Student Partnership Coordinator, you've helped to kind of develop and you used to steer the kind of Students as Co-Creators programme. Could you share a bit more about that and how that kind of came to be?

Absolutely. The programme has grown so much from what it was, Kyra, in 2015. When I first joined, we had four projects. The aim of the programme was to create more opportunities for students and staff to work together, and at that moment in time, the focus was on learning and teaching specifically. As time has gone by and lots of work has been put in with Jennifer, we've actually broadened the scope so now there are three strands on the programme. Students can work in partnership with academics to develop the curriculum, or they can look at questions related to, more broadly, the university learning spaces, things outside the curriculum, but also do research in their disciplinary areas with members of staff, and either staff or students can propose these projects themselves or they can propose them as a group. During this work, gradually, we have thought more about the structures that we have in place to support students and staff, and I think, now, where we are, the rest of the university has a much better understanding of what student-staff partnerships are about really, okay, and that is something that I feel incredibly proud of when I look at all the exciting work that's coming out of the programme. It's really nice to go into meetings and to hear, in several parts of the University, different colleges and schools, so much partnership work is taking place, and it's also becoming more and more radical in its type, which is another very exciting aspect. So, we're looking at more projects that are talking about de-colonising the curriculum, in particular, and anti-racist teaching, and so, yes, that's sort of where it is now. Several aspects of the University are engaging with the programme, and it continues to provide support in terms of workshops for students and staff on how to work together, in terms of a bit of funding for students to be able to participate in the programme, and then we've recently also developed the co-creators' principles, and these are basically a set of principles that were co-created with students and staff participants on the programme because Jennifer and I wanted to ensure that the programme itself is also shaped by the community that we are working with, the students and staff, and so we had a conversation about the challenges, the strengths of the programme, and eventually came up with five core principles together, which are very interesting because they touch upon the nature of the partnerships. So, for instance, they state that they should be democratic, they should be non-hierarchical, there should be an opportunity to make a difference, but, at the same time, those principles also capture what is required in terms of what goes into the partnership, so in terms of commitment, time from individuals, but also from the University.

Yeah. And in terms of the sets of principles, were they kind of always on the agenda for the programme to have or was it kind of decided that they were kind of needed after?

I think it was something that we...we spoke about when...we've been sort of actively thinking about how the programme needs to evolve and how it needs to be changed because neither myself or Jennifer were the first ones to initiate the programme. I inherited it from the Learning Futures team, and then, when Jennifer joined, it was sort of what the team had done and then what I had added to it, so we had that opportunity, after running it for a year, to just sit down and think how things were going, but, also, that aspect of...even the programme needs to be co-created, there needs to be elements to make sure that the power dynamic is balanced. You know, we recognised that we, as the facilitators, hold a lot of power in terms of when projects are submitted, what the deadlines are, and a lot more structures, which are necessary to keep things going, but in terms of the understanding of what the programme is about and what it can look like, and what kind of opportunities it can offer, that knowledge best sits with the actual participants who've been doing the work over the years. So, for us, it was, again, a bit of a...like a no-brainer going into partnership, it was a no-brainer that we wanted the programme itself to have the influence of the participants.

Thank you, Moonisah. And, just moving swiftly on, I think it's fair to say that, you know, you spend a considerable amount of your time working in the Life Sciences, and, like you said, you've carried out some of your own ground-breaking research in Biomedical Science, but I'm sure you might agree that

there are still kind of elements in the field that sustain kind of coloniality and racism. How has being kind of invested in de-colonial and anti-racist work changed your perception of biomedical research?

Wow. Well, I think I'll start by telling you how I kind of got involved with this kind of work. So, I was involved with the Student Partnership Programme more generally. My early research was thinking about the relationships that we develop and how it impacts higher education. But then, when I inherited the Critical Thinking module, I knew that I wanted it to be about global challenges. I knew I wanted to encourage the students to have a critical approach to their disciplinary area. And things just kind of fell into place with timing and events that were having in the world. So, for instance, in the summer of 2020, that was the period of time where I was going through the module and, you know, really thinking about how to change it, we had the murder of George Floyd, and of course that led to an awakening for so many people around the world, including myself, you know, as it highlighted police brutality and the effect that systemic racism has on life. At the same time of course, we were battling with the Covid-19 pandemic, and the government published a report which indicated that black and Asian people are being affected disproportionately – you know, in fact, people from a Bangladeshi ethnicity in particular have twice the risk of death, of dying from Covid-19 when you account for all the other confounding factors, like sex and age and deprivation and region. So, both of these things were very alarming for me and very frustrating. They made me feel very angry, but also created a moment where I just self-reflected and thought, well, what am I doing about any of these problems? And I think, for some people, it was obvious that both of these issues, the Covid-19 disproportionate effect and the murder of George Floyd, are examples of systemic racism, but, for other people, it was perhaps less obvious, especially the Covid-19 scenario. As a scientist, naturally, I started to think about what are the reasons behind this – what, as a scientist, do I need to do, does my research need to consider, so that we can mitigate these risks? And what was most disappointing, and what made it really stand out that this is a systemic racism issue, was that the government, despite having these findings, did not publish any kind of guidelines about how to mitigate them – not for the NHS, not for employers. There were no guidelines in terms of the prioritisation of vaccinations and how that could be changed. So, it felt like, as usual, what society has taught us to do is to question the individual, so people started questioning, you know, what is it about black and Asian people, what is it, maybe it's about their genetics, why are they so prone to dying from Covid-19? And that's when I started to explore race and ethnicity, for the first time in my life, Kyra, and I felt very, very disappointed. I felt disappointed that my own learning, as a student of Biomedical Sciences, as a PhD researcher in the field of Biomedical Sciences, I had never had this conversation about what is race, how is different to ethnicity, and how does this link to biology. I have had some conversations in the University, and the common things that we're taught are, for example, diabetes is more likely to affect Asian people, sickle cell disease is more common in Africans, and it's that kind of approach that leads to the assumption that these are biological disorders, linked to genetics, linked to race. However, we know that race is a social construct. It doesn't have a biological basis. So, that was a particular hit, and the more I read about that, the more it started to make sense that, if race does not have a biological basis, we know that our genetics govern how our cells function, so why are we creating physiological links with race when there's no biological basis for it? Instead, we need to start looking at the social determinants of health, right? These have been ignored for a very long time because I think it's what's requires holding people in structures and policies to account, so it's been ignored.

Another common example is vitamin D. Vitamin D has been used a lot around the conversation of Covid-19. So, vitamin D is one of the very few examples of how skin colour is related to disease. So, for instance, darker skin colour, it's more difficult to synthesis vitamin D because the melanin absorbs the UV light which is actually required to synthesis the vitamin D. However, there are so many other factors that also impact Vitamin D levels, and some of the research that I'm doing now, we're working with architects, we're working with psychologists, we're working with other lecturers in the School of Life Sciences, thinking more about this and what impacts vitamin D status, and it's very interesting because vitamin D is also impacted by where you live in terms of how much space you have to be outdoors, to be in the sun, but also things like air pollution can also impact your vitamin D status.

So, I think, for a very long time, we've been, with Biomedical Sciences research, we've been sort of living in this bubble of objectivity. We've been thinking that everything we do is evidence-based. We've been focusing on the quantitative findings and we've really ignored the qualitative research, or we have included ethnicity in our reports, in our research, we've included some – some papers

include...report race, and some papers report ethnicity, but very, very few papers actually question what that means in terms of the findings – you know, how is it related to the findings? I think it's done as a sort of tick-box activity.

And so, this is when I thought that, actually, for our future Biomedical scientists, we need this on the course. We need to have a basic understanding of what is race, what is ethnicity, why are they important, and so we used, for the module, we used a case study. We followed problem-based learning and the case study looked specifically at two issues: one is the increased rate of maternal mortality for black women in the UK; and the second was the disproportionate effect of Covid-19. We worked with the students, in partnership, through the seminars, not presenting them with any finished answers in terms of why these issues are happening, but giving them the opportunity to share their lived experiences, their personal experiences, and the questions that come up in society again and again, that surround us. You know, we wanted to provoke them to ask those questions in the room, so we could discuss them together, and it led to, I would say, a very interesting, sometimes very challenging, experience, but definitely an experience that I think the students will hopefully remember.

How do you think we can begin to kind of dismantle the kind of colonial and racist epistemologies that have come to shape biomedical research?

I think the first and most important step is to break out of that bubble of objectivity. Angela [Saeni], she recently published an article in Nature, in 2020, and she said something very important: she said that the best research is done not when we pretend that we are perfectly objective but when we acknowledge that we are not. So, I think that, in the Life Sciences, we break out of this bubble of objectivity and we start to value more qualitative methods that capture lived experiences. We need to start challenging the assumptions that are made. And, actually, it was through the work of the students on this case study that we found lots of assumptions being made in healthcare. In relation to the case of maternal mortality, we found that, often, black women are assumed to have a higher pain tolerance and that can lead to them being given less pain medication, which is completely ridiculous and unfair, of course.

And, as an individual, as woman of colour, as a Muslim woman who is obviously Muslim because I wear my head-scarf, I've been at the front-end of receiving some of those assumptions in my own treatment. I recently went for an ultrasound scan with my partner, and the member of staff, because of Covid, he couldn't come inside, but in a way to reassure him, the member of staff looked at him and said, "Oh, don't worry, the sonographer is female," but actually, that's not something that had crossed either of our minds. I wanted him to be there to support me, and he was there to protect – not to protect me, which is what I think they were thinking, that he was a sort of protective figure, controlling figure, but actually just to support me, make sure I was okay. So, I think, had I not been wearing my hijab, that question would not have come up, or that statement would not have been made.

So, I think we need to start teaching and having conversations about the assumptions that we make, particularly about racially minoritized people, and we need to start learning about their cultures, and start focusing on the social determinants of health. So, you know, we can't separate science and the knowledge of health from identity. It's very unfortunate that, in the UK – as I said, I was born here and grew up here, but throughout my education, from primary to higher education, identity has been something that has not really been considered. There's a lot of colour-blindness that exists. So, at school, I was sort of, you know, taught to leave my identity at the door before entering the classroom because, in the classroom, we're all equal, which is really an illusion because we're not equal – we've got different experiences, we've got different struggles. So, I think it's time that Science started to consider that.

There are lots of research articles coming up now which are considering this, which are questioning our use of race and ethnicity, but, essentially, it's those communities that we need to engage with. So,

scientific research needs to engage more closely with the communities that they are researching and the communities that will be affected by their research.

I also think that we need to do that unlearning about race and ethnicity. So, as I said, those common examples of disease being linked to race, rather than ancestry, that leads to more assumptions and that leads to more confusion about what race and ethnicity actually are. So, we need to sort of unlearn what we know from society, what we've been taught before, re-visit our histories, and use that to develop a new understanding of what these terms actually mean and how we're going to use them.

I wanted to dedicate this last segment to kind of discussing what it means to de-colonise the Life Sciences and what can be done in terms of kind of our approaches to learning and teaching. So, my first question is: what anti-racist pedagogical techniques or tools have you kind of come across, or what have you kind of adopted in your own teaching?

So, I would say that, again, I'm someone who's very early in my career, and especially in this field, so, as I said, I started in the summer of 2020, and here we are, summer of 2021, so I have still got a lot of learning to do. But one of the pieces of work at Westminster that has inspired me has been the de-colonising toolkit that you've been involved with as well, so that has been particularly helpful in getting started. But I think that one thing I would like to emphasise is that this kind of work, anti-racist and de-colonising work, can't happen in isolation from partnership work. So, we need to constantly be thinking about the two together, and that's because, if I – and maybe I should have defined this earlier, but, for me, anti-racist and de-colonial work is about dismantling those existing structures and those knowledges that have colonial roots, and thinking about what we teach and how we teach, and to bring in those communities that we're working with, and their cultures and their values. Now, if we do this without students, the people who our work directly affects, then it's taking a colonial approach to de-colonising, which doesn't make any sense. But, also, this work, anti-racist and de-colonial work, I've found is very personal. It requires us to change our mindset, and, as I said earlier, unlearn what we've already been taught, but also, it requires relationships of trust. So, when we're working in partnership, we're able to develop those relationships with students. It's a different way of working, where we share power differently, and I've seen lots of friendships come out of partnerships between students and staff, and it's those kinds of working spaces and relationships that enable the difficult conversations, and these are difficult conversations. They offer many reasons, but for one reason that we haven't had them before, we've ignored them for a very long time, and so we find them to be difficult, but once we start engaging with them in these safer spaces that we can create through working in partnership, then I think it makes it a lot more easier and a lot more comfortable for our students. So, for instance, you know, this work can be quite triggering, and I think that, if I go back to when I was a student, I'm not sure that I would have the confidence to raise my hand if there was something that was triggering me in my curriculum and that came up in the classroom – I'd be quite shy, I'd perhaps find it quite awkward, in a scenario where the lecturer is the gatekeeper of the knowledge and I'm just...just taking it all in. So, working in partnership is exactly how we can go about aiding and supporting anti-racist work and de-colonial work, especially in the context of teaching – for example, to address awarding gaps, which, again, is a reminder that the universities we're working in were not really built for us – they were built for privileged white men. So, it can help us reflect on our institutional structures, it can help us reflect on our curriculums, and think about why don't our curriculums engage and provide the same kind of opportunities for success for all our students, rather than thinking about, oh, what's lacking from these students, what's missing from these students, which is often the narrative – how do we fill those gaps that our students are lacking? I think we need to turn that over and start thinking about what is it about what we're teaching that's not engaging – maybe it's not interesting, or, whatever it is, it's not giving the same opportunities for success.

So, yes, I think we need principled spaces, we need understandings, we need willingness to engage with other perspectives, and to be deliberate and personal, and it's through programmes like the Co-Creators programme that we have at Westminster, the principles that we have at Westminster for partnership, those are the kind of things that we need more of.

What would be your opinion on...? I feel like there's a lot of calls to kind of get more students more involved in the different elements of the University and, you know, we want more student voice and we want students to be involved in this and that. What is your opinion on kind of...people using partnership in kind of tokenistic ways?

Yeah. No, you're absolutely right. I think it happens a lot. I think partnership, de-colonising, these are two fancy terms now in higher education that are being used a lot, and I think that there is a lot of pressure on our students to engage with them, and, again, I feel that this is where partnership has a really important role, especially partnership that is genuine, so partnership that is going in to put an emphasis on the student voice and on the students' learning. And sometimes, I think, to people who have not done that before, it can seem like it's...it's draining and is very challenging. There are challenging aspects of doing it, for both students and staff, but I think, when it's done with the genuine intention of supporting students, and, at the same time, we recognise that, when we work with students, we solve so many questions, right? A lot of the time, as lecturers, we're doing guess work – is this going to work? We think our students might like it, or they might not like it. Having more conversations with students and working together to design those things creates a lot of learning for the students, in terms of skills, their understanding of the curriculum, their understanding of the assessment, and, at the same time, I would say, as a lecturer who's done this, it saves you time. And so, I think we need to create more of that understanding for students, to say, "Look, I know this is a different way of working to what you've traditionally been exposed to in school, but this is university, you're an adult, this is your chance to develop more independently, and here are all the skills that you can gain from working with us, and, also, we appreciate you, we appreciate the work that you put in," and we find ways of rewarding our students for doing this kind of work. We find ways of including them, firstly, you know, as the best that we can, and that will often require funding to support particularly racially minoritized students, mature students who can't get involved due to other barriers, so it will require thinking those things through – how are we practically supporting and enabling students to actually get involved in this kind of work, and then how are we rewarding them, and, at the same time, how are we rewarding our staff, how are we supporting them in disseminating the great work that they've done? Like, at Westminster, partnership is not isolated to the City, it's not isolated to the Partnership Programme, that there is so much other work in terms of partnership and anti-racist curriculums and de-colonial efforts across the University, and we need to come together, and we need to bring it together so that, also, we're not repeating things as much, you know, we're not increasing the workload, but what work has been done, there's lots that can be learnt from it for other Schools, Departments, and individuals.

Absolutely. And I think me just being involved in a project that is kind of, you know, it is student and staff partnership, I can only speak for myself but I really do feel like other students appreciate being kind of involved and being asked to kind of co-produce tools and kind of, you know, make amendments to their curriculum where they see fit, and I think, yeah, like it's just so important, and I think...I'm so happy that you kind of are able to just capture that and you understand that through and through. But, unfortunately, we are coming to the end of this episode, and, as a question I like to end on: what is something you'd like to see happen or see develop within higher education in the next 10 years?

Wow, that's a great question [laughing]! I think that I would still like to see the partnership work around anti-racist and de-colonial practices taking place because I think that this is lifelong effort – the challenges, the experiences that our communities face will always be changing in relation to how the world is changing, so it's not something that we can do now and then say, "Oh, we've done it," but I hope that we continue to do it, we continue to always think about it.

I also hope that we'll have more people of colour in leadership positions in our universities and in lecturer positions, and I think that, in order for us to have more innovation in our curriculums, I hope that, in 10 years' time, we'll be able to engage and be able to award our racially minoritized students better than we do today.

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Amazing. Thank you so much. I just want to thank you again for joining me on this episode of the podcast. It's been so nice getting to know you a bit more and having the opportunity to discuss your recent work – and congratulations again on your publication. You know, your work continues to inspire us on this project, and I highly recommend both students and educators give the preface that you've co-written a thorough read, so links to it will be available in the description. But thank you so much, Moonisah.

Thank you, Kyra. It was so wonderful to have this conversation with you.

To find out more information, access our tools, or get in touch, visit us at blog.westminster.ac.uk/psj

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