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Podcast transcript:

Kyra: Thank you for tuning in to the Pedagogies for Social Justice broadcast, 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 our first episode, I'll be joined by Jennifer Fraser and Fatima Maatwk to talk about the Pedagogies for Social Justice project and our experiences in the student-staff partnership. We wanted this first episode to serve as an introduction to ourselves and the project but also give you an idea of the kinds of conversations that will take place on the platform.

Hi Jennifer and Fatima! Thank you so much for being on our first episode of the Pedagogies for Social Justice podcast. I've been really looking forward to this conversation with you both to kick-start this brand-new element of our project, but of course no pressure. So, let's begin with a round of introductions just sharing a bit about our role at the University of Westminster and of course the Pedagogies for Social Justice podcast. So, to start things off, my name is Kyra. I identify as female, my pronouns are "she" and "her", and I'm of mixed African/Asian descent. I'm currently in my third year of Sociology at Westminster and I've been working at the University as a research assistant for about a year now. To summarise my role, I co-create with students and staff to produce the tools that make up this project. With that, I'll pass over to Jennifer...

Jennifer: Hi Kyra! Thank you so much for having us on your first podcast. It is really exciting to be here and to be part of this project. So, I'm Jennifer Fraser. My pronouns are "they" and "them". I have lived in the UK now for 20 years, and before that, I grew up mostly in what is now called Canada as a white immigrant settler. I'm at the University of Westminster, where I have a joint appointment: I am, half the time, I'm University Director for Student Partnership in the Centre for Education and Teaching innovation; and the rest of the time, I'm Principal Lecturer in the School of Social Sciences, where I teach mostly Sociology. My part in this project has been to work with you and Fatima in thinking about how we can create spaces for decoloniality and anti-racist practices around our learning and teaching in the University, and it's one of the most exciting things that I get to be involved with in my job here.

Fatima: Thank you, Jennifer, and thank you, Kyra, so much for your invitation. I'm Fatima Maatwk. I identify as "she", "her", and I'm Egyptian and German. I have been living in the UK for the past five to almost six years, where I have done my PhD, also at the University of Westminster, and since last September, I have been a Lecturer on the Student Partnership Team at Westminster, so working together with Jennifer and Kyra on co-creation, so student



partnership, and also on the decolonisation project. I'm also a Lecturer and Researcher at the Westminster Business School. My role on the project, or why the project is really important to my heart, comes from being Egyptian and German, and living in the UK, and having studied in all these three countries has given me a very different taste of what colonisation and decolonisation and what power means. So, I'm very excited to be having this conversation today.

Kyra: Amazing – thank you to both of you. So, Jennifer, what kind of inspired and encouraged you to begin the Decolonising the Curriculum Toolkit?

Jennifer: That's a really good question, Kyra, and I think...I'd love to say that there was some grand plan, but there hasn't been. It's really been a very iterative and organic process and I think that's really important because it grew out of discussions with students and colleagues about the sorts of things that they were thinking about, the struggles that they were having, their experiences, both learning and teaching, and in fact everyone being learners in this process in the University, and a lot of what came out of that was that people really want to engage in thinking about decoloniality. They want to think about improving their anti-racist practices, but sometimes they don't know where to start, and I think, like everyone in contemporary universities, they feel very pressured for time, and so going out and doing a lot of research and a lot of reading wasn't something that they felt they had a lot of time for. So, out of those conversations, I started working with a group of students, and with you, Kyra, and then with Fatima, to develop reading lists that would support people as they started that journey of thinking and learning and growth, and, really specifically, the reading lists were things that people could use in the classroom, so they could use in engaging in conversations between students and staff about these processes. So, that's really where the project came from, and then it grew. It felt a little bit like a snowball that's kind of gathering, and people were gathering around it and wanting to participate in it and have those conversations.

Krya: So, knowing everything that you know about establishing your own project and working from the ground up with students and staff, what piece of advice would you give to people who are looking to establish similar projects at their university?

Jennifer: Well, I think that the most important thing is to focus on building relationships and sharing stories so that what you're doing is you're really working in the context that you're in, with the people that you're with, and thinking about the issues that are really important in the space that you're in, because the issues that you're going to be thinking about in a university in the UK are going to be quite different than what you're thinking about in a settler colony, than what a group of people in Bangladesh might be thinking about. That doesn't mean that we can't all learn and share from one another, but I think that there are specificities of what we each bring to that context, and then, very importantly actually, the context, so the history of coloniality in that space and place is really important. So, the first thing I would say is to focus on building relationships and sharing stories, that you grow the project from that.



The second thing I would say is to be in conversation with Black feminists, with critical race theorists, with decolonial theorists and activists. People have been thinking about this and working on these issues for a very long time, and there's so much that we can learn from people who have gone before us. Some of that might be in reading texts, some of it might be in listening in podcasts, some of it might be in attending seminars, it might be getting involved in more grassroots organising – so, I think that there are lots of different ways that you can do that, but to really think about the people who have been involved in these struggles, long before us, and who are continuing to do that work.

And then, the last piece of advice I'd give is to be really careful not to reproduce the logics of coloniality in your work. So, I think, especially in UK universities at the moment, there's a huge focus on you need to measure the impact of everything, we need to be able to trace everything, and that we will know if something is working if we can measure it. I think we need to be really careful with those sorts of things. I'm not interested in a lot of measures. I'm very interested in thinking about what Deanne Bell talks about as like the affective dimensions of decoloniality – so, how do our classrooms feel, what is happening in the conversations that we're having as groups, how are we shifting in ourselves and in our relationships to others and in our relationships to research and in our relationships to knowledge? So, some of those things, they can't be measured, and why should we be measuring them?

So, those are my three points, so: focus on building relationships and sharing stories; focus on reading and listening to the people who've been doing this thinking and engaged in these struggles for a long time; and be very careful not to reproduce the logics of coloniality in setting up any type of work or project.

Kyra: Thank you, Jennifer. I think those are really valid points, and I do like to think that our project really embodies all of those three things. Thank you for sharing. So, Fatima, you recently hosted our seminar series called Students as Co-Creators. Could you perhaps tell us a little bit more about that?

Fatima: Yes. So, as we all know, the reality of working in a pandemic, we have been thinking a lot of what we can do to keep our spirit or philosophy of partnership alive, and what kind of alternatives we have, and then we thought it would be really interesting to try hosting a seminar series that focuses mainly on partnership but from different perspectives, so to really focus on a bigger level, so to say, than just more what we do internally, and to also hear from others, to learn from other institutions and individuals. So, decolonisation has actually also been a big topic in the seminar series, and one of the key connections I personally see between our partnership work and our decolonisation work, besides that we do our work in partnership, so that's one thing, but the other point that really gives importance to partnership when we think of decolonisation is that, at the heart of our understanding and definition of partnership, is really how to meaningfully share power, and this involves of course a lot of change or disruption to how power is traditionally shared in a higher education context, and to really do this in a way that can enable it to take place would mean we need a very safe space. The way we live partnership in our projects, in our



work every day, is that we create a space that is very gentle, very safe, very open, respectful, where these very difficult conversations can take place in a way where we can somehow account for the uncomfortable emotions that can come up. The seminar series has been a space where we're aiming to open these conversations to the public, so beyond Westminster, and where we also wanted to have students speak and respond to these topics because sometimes the focus is not enough on the students, I feel, in partnership. And, yeah, so far it has been received really well, from the impression I get.

Kyra: Amazing! And the links to the videos from the seminar series are available on our website, which will be available in the description. My last question for you, Fatima, is: what makes decolonising partnerships specifically important to you? What does it mean for you?

Fatima: Yes. So, I see it mainly relating to what I was just saying about how we live partnership. So, the creation of this space where we can have these difficult conversations is one of the key important things to me. Like Jennifer was saying, the toolkit came from requests from colleagues asking what can we do, and this is a very difficult question, especially, also relating to what Jennifer was saying, when a lot of the pressure is about creating impact and measuring impact. So, starting this conversation and also showing one's own confusion, possibly, one's own misunderstandings, is a very important part of the process, and from what I've experienced so far in this space of partnership and decolonisation, I've always come up with more questions than answers, but it always showed me then what I need to work on finding out. I feel like these are two take-aways we are taking from our partnership work: on the one hand, the space we're creating; on the other hand, the relationships that are changing. Me personally, for example, as a lecturer doing this kind of work, my teaching has changed, and my understanding of what colonial curricula look like has evolved, and then how to hopefully decolonise. So, all these are aspects that come out of it.

Finally, maybe just one practical aspect to mention is also that, in our Co-Creators projects, there are a lot of projects on decolonising, so a part of having this partnership relationship and space can also lead to very practical outputs in terms of re-validating courses with a decolonisation lens or looking at certain curricula. So, there is also the practical aspect of what we can take away from it.

Kyra: Thank you, Fatima – I completely agree. I can only speak for myself, but being involved in the Student-Staff Partnership has really just made me realise just how important it is to have these spaces that encourage collaboration and community because I feel like those are kind of what are needed in any effort towards radical change. I think being someone who's like a member of staff on this, but also a student, it's really just allowed me to see both sides of the spectrum, but also it's revealed the kind of deep miscommunication that often goes on, and I think the more that universities encourage working with students, rather than for them or not working with them at all, the better we can make these kind of third spaces, like you said, that work for everyone and kind of escape the normative forms of colonialism that are still deeply embedded in the institution.



So, we've talked a bit about the beginning stages of the project and the importance of student-staff partnership in our efforts towards social justice, but I did have one last question for you both, and it was: what is something you'd like to see happen or see develop within higher education in the next 10 years? This can be something small-scale or as radical as you want, from a completely new curriculum, a new national policy, or the complete abolition of something – nothing is too small or far-fetched. So, what does that university look like to you?

Jennifer: What a wonderful opportunity to have a question where we can dream a little because I think that's a really actually important part of working towards change, is to have spaces where we can dream. I think there are two things I'd like to see. So, the first is, I'd really like us to have classroom spaces or learning spaces where we're connecting the materials and the disciplinary knowledge with the lived experiences that we've had and that we're having every day so that our classroom spaces become spaces where we can bring our minds and our hearts and our bodies and our emotions and our lived experiences and be connecting those things very deeply. That doesn't mean I think everyone has to bring all of those things all of the time, but I'd like it to be a space where people can bring the things that they would like to bring and that those connections are being actively made. So, that's like on a very personal, interpersonal level, I'd like to see that happen.

At an institutional level, I'd like to see institutional accountability. So, in the UK, I think it's really important for us to be thinking deeply and carefully about the foundations of the universities that we're learning and working in, and to think about their links to colonial projects - to think about their links to sugar and to slave-trades and to all of the ways in which we are still benefiting and sort of being complicit in the legacies of the British Empire. So, I'd like us to be having conversations about how we are accountable as institutions for that, and not in creating tick-box exercises or fancy slogans that we put on university websites, but thinking really deeply about what that means, and that might involve tearing some bricks down, metaphorically and actually, to get to a different place. So, those are the two things I'd really like to see happen.

Fatima: Thank you, Kyra, for the question because it definitely got me thinking a lot, and also, listening to your answer, Jennifer, I realised...so, hearing the question, I kept thinking, okay, it's a chance to dream, as Jennifer was saying, but then I realised it's actually very difficult to dream, and I think this is also the answer to the question, that what I would to see is a higher education system, let's say, where it's easier to dream. I find it very difficult to connect to an image that's a dream image, even utopian ideal. I find it very difficult to create in my mind, and I would like us, in 10 years' time, to be in this system where we have a much better image of what the dream is, and I think this really comes from, on the one hand, not believing that change is possible on such a big level, and, on the other hand, also from the complexity of all these topics we're dealing with and the complexity of the emotions. So, maybe to get towards a system in which we can dream, I think one of the first steps I would like to see is this space where we can de-tangle these complex concepts to see it growing so that, one day, we get closer to what possibly a perfect system would be.



***Kyra:** Wow – thank you guys for sharing. I think just hearing you both talk about those things alone is really moving, and, who knows, maybe in 10 years’ time, on the anniversary of this podcast, we can have like a reunion episode and we can hopefully talk about how we manifested these things that you’ve said, Jennifer and Fatima, this space where we can make dreaming seem more possible. But, yeah, with that being said, I’d just like to thank you both for being here today and having this conversation with me. I’m inspired and I really look forward to having you both on the podcast again soon.*

Fatima: Thank you, Kyra.

Jennifer: Thanks so much for the opportunity to come and talk with you.

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