University of Westminster - Pedagogies for Social Justice Podcast
Episode 27: Fatima Maatwk
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Kyra: 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 lecturer at Westminster Business School, Fatima Maatwk. Fatima is engaged in a number of research projects on partnership at the university, including the Pedagogies for Social Justice project. In this interview, we discuss Fatima's journey from studying Business and Economics in Egypt, Germany, and the UK, and how this influenced her understanding of race and coloniality. We then go on to ask her for her thoughts on student-staff partnership and the importance of utilising it in the classroom, before we get into some of the ways we might begin to decolonise the Business School.

Kyra: Hi Fatima! Thank you so much for joining me on this episode of the podcast. It's so great to have you here as a guest. How are you doing today?

Fatima: Hi Kyra. Thank you so much for having me. It's quite interesting and a bit scary to be on the guest seat, but I'm very happy to be here, and I'm very well, very happy!

Kyra: Good. I like to start things off with our guests just sharing a little bit about themselves, in their own words, so, first things first, where are you from?

Fatima: So, I'm Egyptian-German, German-Egyptian. So, I was born in Germany and then I grew up in Egypt, and spent a bit of time going back and forth between the two countries. Then, since 2016, I've been in the UK.

Kyra: And just thinking in terms of kind of like your upbringing in Egypt, and I guess your move to Germany as well, what were some of the kind of representations you had access to, and whereabouts did you see like…where you felt almost like you were represented?

Fatima: That's a very interesting question and I think it's one that I engaged with most of my life, and I would have to say, I didn't feel very represented, like neither in Egypt nor in Germany, mainly because…like in…so in Egypt, I was raised by my German single mum, and around me, like I was in a normal Egyptian school so it was mostly very traditional Egyptian families, and I didn't really identify with the context, let's say, and even like the small mixed…the German Egyptian community in Egypt was quite different because it was also expats or families that had a very different life and let's say also financial standards, so

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not…wasn't really relatable. Similarly, in Germany, most of the friends I had, or when I used to go and visit my grandparents, it was a very German context, so it didn't fit either. So, it was kind of…I felt like I belong a little bit in each world, but in terms of representation or relating, there was very little of that.

Kyra: I'm really intrigued to just kind of get an idea of, I guess, your shift from Egypt to Germany. Like how do you feel your kind of understanding of race differed, like between the contexts, or like your sense of kind of racial identity as well?

Fatima: Yeah. So, something I always think of is that, in terms of race, I always felt like people cannot necessarily place me, and when I was a bit older, at some point, I was veiled for a long time, and my name is Fatima, so, in Germany, for example, I would be seen as a Muslim and then Arab person. In Egypt, sometimes could hint that I'm not fully Egyptian. I never knew how exactly they…or what exactly they saw that made them think of that, but I think most of my issues with race between the two countries was always like question marks, so I felt [that writing my story with race was] a list of many, many questions that could be summed up in "What is it exactly?" So, a lot of moments in Germany would be me thinking…if it's a challenging situation, is this about my religion, is this about my Arab identity…? Because in terms of, let's say, skin colour, I'm neither here nor there, in a way. I could fit in Germany, I could fit in Egypt. Some people think I'm from Spain, which is…like another profile of sorts. So, em…so, it's more a lot of questions. And in Egypt, on the other hand, the being part Western, or white, in terms of identity, I guess, and race, often came with a privilege because it is an issue we have there that, em, oh, you're German, so this means something to them that was rarely ever the case. Often, it meant maybe two people [?] money or knowledge or access to certain things that I didn't really have. Or it could often come with a prejudice or with a judgement of, oh, you're German or half-part German, so you're not a proper Muslim because…who will teach you proper Islam or proper Egyptian traditions? So…but it was rarely the case that I could actually tell what's going on. Maybe now, in retrospect, sometimes I can understand, but never during, somehow.

Kyra: So, who would you say kind of inspired your thinking the most when you were growing up? Like it could have been a family member or maybe like a specific public figure, author, things like that…

Fatima: Em…I think somehow my parents come to my mind [laughing], especially… especially thinking of education, somehow, thinking of it in terms of education. So, although my father passed away when I was a few months old, he…he was the first in his family to go to university properly, and he like went from this tiny, tiny village in Egypt, with no wealth, a very poor background, to having a scholarship, [go to do his PhD] in Germany, so quite a big deal. And my mum, like…everything she did her whole life was encourage us for education, like if we had anything, it would go into our education, and she was the one who pushed me to continue with education. Like after the undergrad, do a Master's, do a PhD! When I was younger, when I was a teenager, I used to have fights with her because I don't want to think about a PhD now, I'm 16 [laughing]! So they…they definitely shaped a

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lot of my journey and my thinking. Yeah, I think… I mean, there's also quite a few teachers in Egypt who…who have also left an impression that lasted with me until now, like certain conversations I had with them and certain instances that somehow were meaningful to stay with me 20 years later.

Kyra: Amazing. Would you mind giving us kind of like a breakdown of your educational journey, like where you started and obviously where you are currently…?

Fatima: So, I went to school in Egypt. It was like an Egyptian semi-governmental school, so [the differences depend a little bit]. So, our curriculum was taught in English, which was quite lucky. Then, with 16, I finished high school. I went to an Egyptian university for a couple of years studying Business and Management, and then I transferred, so from the Egyptian university to a German one, in Berlin, Humboldt University, and I did…it's an inter-university transfer, so I didn't move to re-start, but, still, the two years I studied were not counted for, so I had to re-start eventually, and em…yeah, that was interesting experience because it made me think I was studying for two years – how can you only give me like one semester worth of credits? But, later on, a lot of things crystalised [laughing]. Then, I continued my Master's studies also at Humboldt University, in Business and Management. My interest was a lot…things around culture, business ethics, so a bit of these topics, and then I worked in international development, again, mostly organisations and projects working between Germany and Egypt, for four years, and, in 2016, I did my PhD at Westminster Business School on [educative] diversity perceptions and how we construct our understandings of diversity and of ourselves. And here then, I afterwards joined Westminster as a Lecturer, where I met you…

Kyra: Yeah! And just like looking back now, what was it about Business Studies and kind of like Management Studies that really just…like got you? What kind of inspired you to pursue that?

Fatima: So, I wish there was an inspiration behind it [laughing], but I'll be very honest and confess, when I finished high school at 16, I had no clue what I wanted to do, and I didn't…I think I didn't know enough of the world to take this decision that felt like it will change my whole life, and my thinking was kind of, okay, what is something that I can do that will just make me able to work anywhere, and I had this idea of what's management about, business about, and I saw it from a perspective of, well, every institution needs to be managed somehow, like I'm not bound to a field or to a certain job role. So, I didn't go much into accounting and finance and the things that put you in a specific box. So, that's how I chose my studies really… And then, somehow, when I started working, because of my focus I think on things like communication and culture, projects of sorts, so this somehow got me into international development and then my path just changed away from – so I've not really worked in business as such.

Kyra: Yeah. And I guess thinking about your time in just university in general, obviously you said that you were kind of involved in thinking about questions related to diversity and like equality, communication, culture. When do you think your opinion of the institution

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changed and what was that like for you?

Fatima: I think it all came at a much later stage. Thinking of the question, I feel a bit like I don't have a fully- formed opinion, which is just like an interesting point for myself, but I think it was when I started seeing the world or life as more than just the…the specific space I'm in, and I started really understanding how the institution is, simultaneously, a product of but also a shaping factor of historical, social, economic, political contexts. That's when I started feeling different, because I started understanding that the institution – anything I find amazing or anything I find to be a struggle within the institution is not just from the institution. That institution is also accountable, so it's this…but it's not just the institution, and I think this was a key moment for me to feel a shift.

Kyra: It's kind of like a constant kind of battle, isn't it?

Fatima: Absolutely [half-laughing]!

Kyra: And is there anything that you kind of wish you knew then that I guess you know now, like maybe looking back at your early years in your PhD or when you started, like, yeah, when you came to Westminster Business School, like what do you wish your younger self knew?

Fatima: I wish…some things are a bit…like I wish I knew or grasped fully that everyone sometimes feels like an imposter, or that I don't actually have to know everything, or that everyone is struggling somehow in their own way with something in terms of their education. So, there are these more…like bigger emotional things that I think would have mattered, but also, I think I wished…I wish I knew or…I wish I knew how to navigate the system. So, the more I'm staying at the institution, I'm realising that there are often mechanisms out there. There is a way to find someone to talk to if something is not going the way it's supposed to. This is…this also applies to my studies in Berlin, where I faced a few situations where, now, I think, back then, if I would have known what I know now, I would have done these and these and these things. So, I wish I knew about the channels, the mechanisms, the ways of moving through things in a university, both the actual policies that often, as a student, I had no clue about, what my rights are, so I wish someone had given me like honest and very clear path or idea of these are your rights and this is how you can make sure to get them, and these are also your responsibilities, so this is something that is on you, and that's something that is on the institution, and this is what you can do about it. So, these kind of things…

Kyra: Thank you. And just thinking about a student-staff partnership, you're obviously involved in quite a few student-staff partnership kind of programmes. Why is partnership kind of particularly important to you, and I guess what is your favourite thing about doing this kind of work?

Fatima: Yes. That's a question I really like because…. So, having studied in Egypt and in Germany and then in the UK, I feel like I experienced three very different educational

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systems, and some of them being quite hierarchical, authoritarian, some much less. I feel when it comes to partnership, it's the space with such a unique relationship between students and staff that I…growing up and being in education, I never even knew existed, and it was so non-existent to me that I never even thought it's something I wished for, but now that I've experienced how this works and how the space operates, I think back and I always think I wish I would have somehow gotten into student partnership, I would have come across it, em, throughout my education, and… And I think it would have…it would have given me a lot of the things that I was just saying I wish I had, so this understanding and this confidence also to be seen by staff as a student, to be really fully and wholly respected. I think that's something really special about partnership.

Kyra: And why do you think some lecturers and academic staff are kind of reluctant to work in partnership or utilise it in their teaching?

Fatima: I think there are two things that come to my mind. Firstly is, if I imagine being in academia for years and years, or a few decades, especially more senior academics and lecturers, then you've kind of experienced most of or all of your time as a student and later on as a lecturer in a system of hierarchies and power and roles that is very different to what student partnership is about. And student partnership is relatively new, so it's not something that's been around for decades. So, I think it can feel quite foreign, especially if it does not relate at all to how they experienced being a student. And, even myself, when now working in partnership, I always think, oh, I wish I knew these things when I was a student. Now, if I had this very traditional experience and then years or decades of working in these same traditional ways, it can be quite…a foreign shift.

And I think the other thing could be the concept of expertise and knowledge, and what is considered appropriate and "real" [laughing], you know, knowledge, "real" in air-quotes, and I think, once we… once we start realising that knowledge is not only about what is proven and what is rigorous research and so on, we will start coming away from education being this thing where those who have the knowledge deliver it to those who are seen not to have it. And that's not what partnership is about.

Partnership is about everyone contributing equally in different ways, but equally meaningfully, in the process. So, I think these dynamics of what one's own experiences are, then coupled with "But this is the subject knowledge and I'm the one who has the subject knowledge", can make it quite a difficult barrier to…to break through.

Kyra: And I guess thinking about your own kind of experience with student-staff partnership and actually working with students yourself, what are some of the responses you get from students who you've been in partnership with?

Fatima: I think, because I…I work in…like I work in the Student Partnership team, and in the Students as Co- Creators programme, and with the Students as Co-Creators Ambassadors, which is one of my absolutely favourite parts of…of my work, so what I get is more a flavour of the space, rather than direct like… I feel like I shouldn't say I have co-created something

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with students, for example. I didn't have like an official co-creators project as so, but I can… in this space, I can feel its flavour and what I really like is the joy I see in it, and how learning and co-creating is really about the joy we experience. It's a very…a very trusting space. It's a very warm, friendly space. And often I hear from students on the programme how…how much…like… For example, in an interview with Tino, who's also an episode on this very podcast, she said how this…how her co-creators project was one of her favourite…favourite parts of studying, and being in the university, and this always makes me feel so emotional and humble and just like thankful that this space exists. So, I think the joy of being a student and in university, there can be so much joy that I think we don't experience enough of, and I feel like student-staff partnerships, with everything they mean and bring, can be a real space for that joy. So, yeah…

Kyra: No, I agree, and I think, yeah, I feel the same, like I think even working…with my experience in kind of like student-staff partnership, like I feel like…I guess I actually do get to kind of co-create in that sense, and, yeah, like there's just so much joy in it, and I think there's so much to learn from both sides, like I have so much to learn from like the staff, and then they have so much that they can learn from kind of me and my experience, and I think just being able to kind of like foster these kind of spaces and do meaningful kind of work, like especially decolonial work, like I think it really just makes all the difference, and I think, yeah, like it would be nice for other people to kind of get to experience what we get to experience.

Fatima: Mm, absolutely.

Kyra: I wanted to also dedicate some time to talking about I guess decolonising the Business School. I wanted to first ask, how is Business, and kind of all the subject areas that come under it, like in what ways do you kind of feel like they're still very much colonial?

Fatima: That's a million dollar question, as they say, and I wish I had…I wish I had an extensive answer and a definitive one, but I think the only way we can approach such questions is really to look at all the smaller spaces that make up the bigger space of a business school. A few things came to my mind thinking of this. So, one thing is, em, certain…certain aspects and how they are conceptualised, so how we look at culture, which is a big part of Business Studies and International Business and International Management and all these theories and subjects really that fall under Management, how we conceptualise culture and how it's Eurocentric is a huge problem, especially because it directly then also shapes how business is done, you know, how companies are set up, how then employees experience their workplace and so on. So, that's a real issue.

Another thing, which I think is…probably applies to most, if not all, disciplines, is, a lot of what we constitute to be proper knowledge stems from four-star peer review journals, the majority of which are based in the US or in the UK, so what does this….or how does this then shape the discipline? When I was doing my PhD, I was doing it across Germany, Egypt and the UK, and looking at literature and references I can cite that are considered good enough for a PhD, em, was quite difficult for Egypt because a lot of the…a lot of the

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sources I found were not from four-start journals, but this doesn't make them any less important or valuable. So, that's…that's also quite a problem.

And another thing is also how we use certain theories and what assumptions they come with. So, theories like Hofstede's theory of cultural dimensions and comparisons is one that I find…difficult to… to think of because we make this assumption that we can define a culture, we can define how everyone in that culture is supposed to be, so we're creating stereotypes, prejudices, which is very much a colonial thing. And I used Hofstede's theory along with other things in my PhD, and, the more I work in this decolonial space and work, the more difficult I feel about it. And then, what I fall back to is how I felt as an Egyptian-German thinking of Hofstede's theories and then thinking, actually, the way he describes this, I do feel this in Egypt, a little bit, or in Germany, and then I feel that I'm part of these cultures. I can feel this, and I know the culture well enough to know this is not a statement you can just say, "Egypt is that way" or "Germany is that way". But then I think…but the theory is out there, and others who've never been to Egypt, never thought of it, can make that assumption about every Egyptian they meet. So, it's…it's hard because it's… And often these theories are some of the most established ones and the most used ones, and you cannot research something without…at least then explaining why you're not using it, because it's that established. So, that's also quite a thing.

And I think, overall, it's…the colonialism just manifests in all these…sometimes smaller, sometimes really huge, things in how we teach, what we teach, how we then apply the things we teach, and, em, yeah…

Kyra: And do you feel like it's even possible to, I guess, decolonise Business Studies when I guess the very essence of the discipline is like rooted in, obviously, capitalism, and that is a system in itself that was able to really expand through imperial and kind of colonial endeavours – like how are we able to kind of separate, if we are, like the discipline from, I guess, the very essence of what business means?

Fatima: Em…that's…another million dollar question [laughing] because it's…I think… I think, in a way, we cannot separate the two because it's…it's a cycle, and I think there is no way to find where one begins and one ends. We have an educational system all over the world that has its legacies and nuances of colonialism, whether in Business or elsewhere, and eventually it is a system that technically exists to give students what they need to then be in the outer world, which is then, for Business students, the capitalist world. So, I don't know how to separate them or where to start, but I think that…often, like to do this kind of work might be easier in the…in education, if I think it's… Colonialism and capitalism feel like they are…different but intertwined things, one the result of the other or not, but eventually experiencing both can feel very similar, and I'm thinking how much can I, let's say, maybe, as an employee [do/to] something, like what kind of consequences do we have in our life, decolonising curricula – is it easier? If we're thinking of theories and material, it might be easier to start with something that is about someone else who wrote that theory at some point, so it might be a slightly less dangerous way to start somehow. But, eventually, I think we need to be looking at both because one…for one to change, the

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other needs to change because it would also be unfair to…to decolonise and to change everything in the educational system and then let students graduate and be…be hit by the ugly reality of, oh, we're not prepared for what we're seeing here because what we learned was something else. So, it's…it's a very challenging thing, I think.

Kyra: Mm, no, absolutely. And I guess this kind of links to my next question: what do you feel like Business lecturers can do to begin to decolonise their pedagogy and their practice?

Fatima: I think one of the first things is to start having conversations with students. So, we need, as lecturers, to start listening and talking about these things, start understanding how our students are experiencing these…forms of coloniality and what they think the solution is and what they need us to be doing. To do so, I think one of the key things is to just start getting a bit comfortable with very uncomfortable conversations. And I think, often, we, was lecturers, maybe if we're faced with such a situation, we might react immediately and in a problem-solving way, which is often not helpful, and we sometimes need to sit a little bit with some very uncomfortable things and not jump at the first solution and really see this as a long process of starting the conversations.

Kyra: Thank you. And, I guess, what advice would you give to students in or entering business schools right now that also want to demand social justice and equality in that space?

Fatima: I think one thing I wish I would have done as a student, and this is why I think of it, is to speak to other students because there were many situations where I felt quite challenged by things that were about racism, and quite heavy things, and I think I was stuck in this thought of, well, how can I talk to a professor about this, how can I talk to someone in the university about this, and I think, if I would have had the thought or…maybe also the relationships with students I felt I identified with and spoken to them, this could have started a very different process. So, I think I would tell them speak to each other and, when things are difficult, think together of what you want, and it's much easier to then maybe speak to lecturers, and think together of what you want to achieve for social justice. And sometimes then you need to find that one person who will explain the system to you, so look for that person, and it's always easier – it would have been, I think, a source of safety for me if I would have spoken to others, yeah.

Kyra: No, I think I feel the same way too, like I think getting involved in organising like as soon as you can is just so important, like even if it's just through maybe meeting somebody through a society and seeing if we have any common interests and then going from there, like I think, yeah, definitely opening up yourself in that way is important, especially in like the earlier years of your degree. But, yeah, thank you! Unfortunately, we're coming to an end to this interview, but, as a question I like to end on, as you already know, is: what is something you'd like to see happen or see develop within higher education in the next 10 years?

Fatima: Yes. Since I know this is a question in every episode, I kind of also thought a bit. So,

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there were two things that came to my mind. First, free education, and I think many of our podcast guests have said that. I still think it cannot be said enough because it's…yeah, if education wasn't free in Germany, for example, I would never in a million years have had a chance in all the things I later got to do. So, that's one thing.

The other thing is really to….education…I'm thinking of moments I had where I suddenly had this amazing text that I read that really inspired me, or I had this conversation with often you, Kyra, Jennifer or with the ambassadors, and it's just so inspiring and so deep that it brings true joy, and these moments make me think of many other moments that were like this for me, and I just wish that we can get to a point where this is what education is about, where we can really experience this joy of learning, of knowing, of even struggling with things. I feel like many things, like worrying about how to afford education, like worrying about all the pressures of it and what to do afterwards and…all these things overshadow this joy, like too often. So, I just wish we could somehow make this a space where we really experience this joy of learning, of reading, of writing, of maybe drawing, so whatever someone does in the university, that they can just do it with a bright smile. I wish we could see that more.

Kyra: Thank you so much, Fatima, for being here today. It was just so nice getting to know a bit more about yourself, a bit more deeply, and I guess your academic background and how we can begin to really kind of decolonise the Business School and what Business lecturers can do. But, yeah, thank you so much for joining me.

Fatima: Thank you, Kyra!

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