

Decolonizing History

Activity

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This activity is best used as an introductory session in which students will be expected both to introduce themselves to each other (and the tutor), and to learn about the expectations of the module. The activity encourages students to reflect on their positionality, their goals and their prior experiences of learning, and to collaborate to produce a shared set of 'ground rules' for the seminar going forwards. It is particularly designed for modules where students may need to engage with difficult or uncomfortable materials or histories, such as histories of slavery, racism and colonialism, but will be beneficial for any history seminar.

Context and aim

This seminar activity invites students to introduce themselves and to work together to develop a shared sense of community in the classroom. The activity draws on anti-racist pedagogical approaches as described by Kyoko Kishimoto (2018) and Meleisa Ono-George (2019). Using anti-racist pedagogies is a crucial aspect of decolonizing history. They foster critical thinking and encourage both staff and students to reflect on their social positionality in the classroom, both in relation to the other people in the room and in relation to the materials being taught. Anti-racist pedagogies also empower students to bring their experiences and expertise to the classroom and to take collective responsibility for their learning.

Preparation (tutors)

Tutors should read the following before using this activity:

Kyoko Kishimoto, 'Anti-racist pedagogy: From faculty's self-reflection to organizing within and beyond the classroom', *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 21:4 (2018), pp. 540–54.

Meleisa Ono-George, 'Beyond diversity: Anti-racist pedagogy in British History departments', *Women's History Review*, 28:3 (2019), pp. 500–507.

Eugenia Zuroski, "Where do you know from?": An exercise in placing ourselves together in the classroom', *MAI: Feminism & Visual Culture* (27 January 2020): <https://www.maifeminism.com/where-do-you-know-from-an-exercise-in-placing-ourselves-together-in-the-classroom/>.

Preparation (students)

Students should prepare for the seminar by reading:

Elise Ahenkorah, 'Safe and Brave Spaces Don't Work (and What You Can Do Instead)', *Medium* (21 September 2020): <https://medium.com/@elise.k.ahen/safe-and-brave-spaces-dont-work-and-what-you-can-do-instead-f265aa339aff>.

You should then reflect on the following introductory questions.¹ These are designed as prompts to help you introduce yourself. It is important that we recognize that we bring different experiences and different sets of learning into the classroom and that we will learn better together if we have an understanding of each other's perspectives.

- 1 What would you like us to call you?
- 2 Would you like to share the pronouns you would like us to use in reference to you?
- 3 What are your intellectual interests?
- 4 Our intellectual preoccupations come from a variety of paths, and are inspired and sustained in a variety of ways. What do you think about a lot? What have you learned about, and what would you like to learn more about? How did these interests come to you? What brought you to your ideas, or your ideas to you?
- 5 What is your intellectual work for?
- 6 What are you hoping to accomplish or learn in this module, or in your degree more generally? What will you do with that learning?
- 7 Is there anything else you would like us to remember or recognize about you?

Description of activity

Part 1: Introductions [c. 25–30 minutes – 5 minutes plus 1–2 minutes per student]

Provide the prompt questions for students' preparation (given above) on the screen. Divide students into pairs and encourage each pair to introduce themselves to each other based on the prompts, for approximately 5 minutes. Emphasize that not all questions have to be answered: students can share as much or as little as they would like to.

Then go around the room and ask the students to share as much or as little as they would like to with the whole group (all must answer the first question, 'what would you like us to call you?'). Tutors should acknowledge points of shared experience or interest and should encourage other students to do the same.

The aim of this exercise is to ensure that all students speak in the large group in the first seminar, thus building confidence, and begin to get to know each other. The tutor should also participate in this activity by sharing their own responses to the prompt questions. This is important as by sharing something of themselves in the classroom, the tutor is positioned as a learner in collaboration with the students. Tutors who have more social power (e.g. those who are in permanent positions, senior and/or very experienced) may wish to deliberately make themselves vulnerable in this moment, in order to more fully disrupt the power dynamics of the classroom.

Part 2: Setting 'ground rules' [c. 15 minutes]

Introduce this exercise by noting that the module might cover difficult subject matter or material, or make us feel uncomfortable. This might be specific to the module's content, or it might be a general point about the nature of history. Explain that setting 'ground rules' will help everyone in the group to understand the expectations of the seminar space and to hold each other accountable in doing so (including the tutor).

Provide the following prompt questions on the screen:

- How can we make sure that everyone is able to participate in this class?
- How will we deal with any issues that arise?
- How can we make our seminars 'accountable' spaces?

Divide students into small groups or pairs (where possible, different to the pairs used in the first exercise) and encourage them to discuss these questions for approximately 5 minutes.

Bring up a blank slide or document and invite students to suggest ‘ground rules’ for the class based on their discussion. Type these into the document as students suggest them and encourage students to add to, nuance, or challenge the suggestions of others. Tutors can also add to the list themselves or challenge suggestions if necessary. Once you have a final list, seek agreement from the students that these are the ground rules that they will abide by. Post these ground rules on the module’s Virtual Learning Environment.

This exercise encourages students to take ownership and responsibility for their behaviour in seminars. Students are much more likely to remember the ground rules (and to follow them) when they are created collaboratively with each other and with staff rather than imposed by the tutor. Taking the time to set up these ground rules early on makes it much less likely that issues will arise when confronting difficult subject matter or material later in the module. If issues do arise, then both students and the tutor can refer back to the ground rules in any resulting discussion.

Note

- 1 Adapted from Eugenia Zuroski, “Where Do You Know From?": An Exercise in Placing Ourselves Together in the Classroom', *MAI: Feminism & Visual Culture* 27 January 2020, <https://maifeminism.com/where-do-you-know-from-an-exercise-in-placing-ourselves-together-in-the-classroom/>.