

## Starting points: Building your on-campus decolonisation network

Hi, my name's Michelle Bond, I'm an academic liaison librarian at Coventry University. I think my talk is a little bit of a continuation of Ian's final point, about doing the work, not leading it, as a white librarian. I wanted to talk a little about finding a starting point for decolonisation work, with the recognition that everyone's at different stages – some of us may have made a start, some of us may have no idea where that start might be. So this is probably more for people who have no idea, I wanted to share with you a little about what I did, we did here at Coventry.

### 1. Respecting that you're building on the work of others

So the reason that my talk is about building your on-campus decolonisation network, rather than specifically about decolonising libraries is that our libraries don't exist in a vacuum. We are not and cannot decolonise our libraries by ourselves. We exist as part of a continuum of this work and as part of the bigger movement to decolonise universities and decolonise education. I think that's a message that came through in Kaye's talk this morning, that we are part of what should be a wider university effort.

So when I talk about starting an on-campus decolonisation network, I need you to know that you're not doing it for the library's benefit. It's really essential work, but I think it's really important to recognise and acknowledge that others on your campus have been thinking about and working towards decolonisation for years, or decades. You might be starting from scratch, but other people are not.

This is something you need to keep in mind when you're working in this area, thinking about starting a decolonisation network, is that it might be already going on and there's definitely already people on your campus talking and thinking about these issues, so you need to work from this place that you're the newbie in this situation and you're asking people for their help and solidarity. And what you're offering in return is a commitment to this work and a focal point for organisation, a space for people to come together perhaps. The library is sometimes seen as a 'neutral' place and this can potentially be utilised to bring people together.

I guess the other thing to say there is that you shouldn't be looking for quick wins and quick goals, it's really satisfying to achieve something, easy for us to point to short term wins ... but like I said people have been working towards this for decades so whatever you achieve, should you achieve anything, is in the context of that. Which I think is probably going to be hard for managers in particular to hear as we all need to evidence what we're doing and achieving. But we're working for a bigger goal, for big, deep rooted and systemic change, it's not an easy quick thing to do.

### 2. The work of building a network

Having said that, I'm going to talk a little about starting the work of building a decolonisation network.

I probably first heard the term 'decolonisation' a couple of years ago, and attended a great event on campus, organised by the Student Union as part of Black History Month, a panel talk on decolonising the curriculum\*. Again: I want to emphasise that you're not going to be the first person on your campus to have taken an interest in decolonisation, although it might feel like that at the start.

At the time I was doing a PG Cert in Teaching and Learning and a small section was on decolonisation, which is where I recognised I wanted to learn more and came up with the idea of starting an on campus decolonisation reading group, really selfishly for my own benefit. Came from a

selfish place of 'I want to learn more about this' and was very fortunate to have a wonderful law lecturer join me, Dr Zainab Naqvi, we started the reading group and she was able to bring people in to the group as was I. We meet once a month and discuss texts – we started by working through *Decolonizing Methodologies* by Linda Tuhiwai Smith and it's been an incredible experience to be surrounded by so many people who are so smart, who can read something and stretch it and challenge it and each other about the ideas we're exploring together.

It started from this place of selfishness but I hope I've been able to put out on campus something that's beneficial for more people. It's a staff only space, we had a number of discussions around this, continue to have discussions around this, whether to keep it a staff space or make it a staff-student group. But we have kept it as a staff only space as a way for people to be OK with being a learner in that space, to be OK being uncomfortable with new ideas and knowledge.

From that group as well we launched last August/September the Decolonisation @CU Network, with a launch event with a number of great speakers. That was to show and bring together people from across our university group and really use it to find out who on campus was interested, what kind of work they were interested in doing and keep conversations going, make connections between each other. I'm really proud that through the network people have got to know others from outside their silos. We're a massive university and it's really easy to stay in your own area. A really major benefit of building your network is being able to smash these silos and get to know so many different people across campus that you might not have known before. And they're all incredibly smart and amazing people that you might not have come across otherwise. I'm always really pleased to think of people who have been connected via the network. Again, I said before that you're not doing this for the library – I don't think I've necessarily created any tangible benefit for the library other than people know me and know I'm interested and am willing to collaborate. It's an incredible thing of putting yourself out there and offering yourself, I'm more of a practical, organisational person so bring that to the table and to act as a little bit of a focal point for people. And it's part of what a library should act as, we often say we're the heart or hub of the campus, and that's how you can act, as a place and a person to bring people together.

### 3. This is not a checklist

My talk feels a bit like a callback to Ian's, or that they bookend each other, because I'd like to finish by again acknowledging the work of others who have influenced me and leave you with a final reminder. There's so much power in collaboration and solidarity and kindness – I've been incredibly lucky to find this on my campus through people like [Dr Zainab Naqvi](#), [Dr Gurnam Singh](#) and others in the decolonisation reading group and [Professor Gus John](#), whose words are so powerful. Whenever I've heard him speak, Professor John always reminds us that decolonisation starts with ourselves, in our own minds (see final page for some links to the professor's work). The work of decolonisation begins with us having first deconstructed our own minds. Or we can, but then we run the risk of reducing decolonisation to a checklist, rather than making fundamental change.

When I first submitted the idea for this talk, I thought I'd go through some hints and tips for you, based on my own experiences. I thought it might be useful. And that's probably why I struggled so much to write this talk, because a checklist of things for you to go away and do would have been wrong. So my final reminder is an echo of Gus John's words: your starting point isn't necessarily to dive straight in to changing reading lists. You need to work to deconstruct your mind, deconstruct what you know and think about libraries, about universities, as your starting point. And through this you may be fortunate enough to have conversations with people who are much smarter than you,

who you can do the work with, who you can give your time, your privilege and perhaps then you'll be able to help enact change.

\*Here's a blog post from a student reflecting on that event:

<https://www.cusu.org/news/article/bame/Reflections-on-the-BHM-Panel-Talk/>

Couple of bits of reading/watching:

<https://wonke.com/blogs/to-decolonise-the-curriculum-we-have-to-decolonise-ourselves/>

Gus John BELMAS lecture: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kD-s\\_UDRftM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kD-s_UDRftM)