Postcolonial Entry Points into Networked Learning

Murat Oztok, University of Aberdeen, UK, murat.oztok@gmail.com

Abstract

It would be overly simplistic to assume that these collaborative pedagogical approaches function uniformly across diverse student cohorts. Postcolonial theory can provide a framework to systematically investigate dynamics that potentially generate differentiated experiences or outcomes within networked learning spaces. This research delves into the pervasive influence of Western-centric discourse within online postgraduate education, shedding light on its dual impact of colonising both knowledge and identities. While networked learning promises a collaborative and inclusive educational paradigm, it becomes evident that the dominance of Western cultural norms acts as a powerful agent of colonisation, silencing non-Western perspectives and erasing their voices in the digital realm. This perpetuates historical colonial power imbalances, thus extending colonial legacies into the landscape of networked learning. The study unearths three critical entry points to this discourse, each of which amplifies the nuanced challenges posed by colonial dynamics in networked learning. First, it elucidates the reinforcement of dominant discourses, revealing how networked learning, when devoid of critical oversight, risks sustaining Western-centric narratives and structures, thereby overshadowing subaltern perspectives. This phenomenon mirrors the experiences of participants and exacerbates colonial knowledge hierarchies. Secondly, the research uncovers the marginalisation of subaltern voices within networked learning. Power imbalances within the network, if left unaddressed, can compel subaltern participants to conform to dominant discourse, leading to unequal engagement. These circumstances closely resemble the experiences reported by participants, highlighting the perils of marginalisation and the need for redress. Thirdly, the study illuminates the unsettling imbalance in knowledge sharing, reflecting the concerns raised by participants. Networked learning may inadvertently exhibit knowledge-sharing disparities, with subaltern voices contributing disproportionately while dominant discourses remain unchallenged. This dynamic impedes the network's potential to facilitate a diverse and enriched exchange of knowledge. The research underscores the pressing importance of explicitly addressing these challenges in networked learning practices. Failure to do so risks the unintentional perpetuation of colonial discourses, hindering the transformative potential of networked learning. By acknowledging these postcolonial entry points and enacting measures to rectify them, networked learning can overcome exclusionary dynamics and more effectively challenge and dismantle colonial legacies, thereby advancing a more inclusive, equitable educational landscape for all stakeholders and providing a comprehensive solution to the complex issue at hand.

Introduction

Questions concerning social justice within collective pedagogies remain largely uncharted and often possess a self-referential character. At the heart of these assertions lies the argument that the interconnected nature of such educational practices has the potential to offer equal opportunities for all individuals to freely express their ideas and engage in group activities (see, for instance, Harasim, 2000; Rajasingham, 2011). Research that draws upon empirical data, including studies that elucidate the multitude of identities among participants (e.g., Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013), compare the volume of contributions across different student cohorts (e.g., Jorissen et al., 2015), or concentrate on the "haves and have nots" approach promoted by "digital divide" research (e.g., Warschauer, 2003), can offer only peripheral support for these utopian assertions. The mere connection of individuals within a learning environment does not guarantee that educational activities or outcomes are equitable for all participants. There is a pressing demand for a theoretical framework that does not conflate equity solely with accessibility or participation but, instead, focuses on the otherwise hidden dynamics by which networked learning activities may yield suboptimal outcomes. Naturally, the question arises: How can we systematically investigate these underlying dynamics that potentially generate differentiated experiences or outcomes within networked learning spaces?

In this research, I utilise postcolonial theory to deconstruct the experiences of specific individuals within a networked learning space, with a particular focus on the context of postgraduate education. The primary focus of

this research will be on the complex connection between identities and knowledge in order to demonstrate how non-dominant cultures, pedagogies, applications, and values may be overshadowed during networked learning activities.

A crash course on Postcolonial Perspectives

Postcolonial theory offers a multifaceted perspective on the continuing impact of colonialism and its profound implications for global cultures, societies, and power structures (Ahmed, 2000). At its core, postcolonial theory delves into the complex interplay between the historical colonisation of various regions by European powers and the subsequent imposition of Western values, norms, and institutions. Below, I will summarise three canonical interpretations.

According to Said (1993), the essence of postcolonialism lies in the critical examination of how Western colonial powers constructed and represented the Orient. This process, often referred to as "Orientalism," depicted the East as exotic, mysterious, and inferior, thereby justifying and perpetuating the colonial enterprise. Said's work underscores the importance of deconstructing these colonial discourses and acknowledging their lasting effects on both colonisers and the colonised. Bhabha (1994), introduces the concept of the "third space" or "hybridity" within postcolonialism. He underscores the idea that postcolonialism is not solely about resistance or decolonisation but is equally about the complex, hybrid, and often ambivalent ways in which cultures and individuals respond to colonial and postcolonial conditions. This approach highlights the in-between spaces where cultures, identities, and discourses intersect, negotiate, and transform. Spivak (1999), adds another dimension to postcolonial theory by focusing on the "subaltern" – marginalised and oppressed groups situated at the peripheries of societies. Her work emphasises the critical need to give voice to these subaltern groups and to understand the challenges they face in expressing their experiences and perspectives within the dominant discourse.

In summary, postcolonial theory highlights the complexities of power dynamics, cultural hegemony, and inequalities, with a shared objective of challenging the historical and contemporary structures that continue to influence global affairs, including matters related to identity, representation, knowledge production, and social justice (Oztok, 2019).

Networked Learning from Postcolonial Perspective

"Networked learning entails processes of collaborative, cooperative, and collective inquiry, knowledge creation, and informed action, all rooted in trust-based relationships, driven by a sense of shared challenges, and facilitated by convivial technologies. It fosters connections among individuals, learning environments, and arenas of action, fostering the exchange of ideas, resources, and solutions across temporal, spatial, and media boundaries" ((NLEC), 2021, p. 320). It would be overly simplistic to assume that these collaborative pedagogical approaches function uniformly across diverse student cohorts. In the context of postcolonial theory, certain societal dynamics tend to be presented as natural, thereby perpetuating power imbalances within the very social fabric of these relationships. The result is that dominant cultures establish their values and norms as the norm, categorising anything that deviates from this paradigm as 'other' or 'different' (Ahmed, 2000).

Postcolonial theory can provide a framework to systematically investigate dynamics that potentially generate differentiated experiences or outcomes within networked learning spaces. First, it highlights the issue of cultural bias and hegemony, contending that networked learning often propagates Western cultural norms and perspectives, thereby marginalising non-Western cultures and reinforcing the dominance of Western discourses in digital content and resources. Second, it questions the Western-centric pedagogical approaches employed in networked learning, which may not align with the cultural and pedagogical norms of non-Western learners, potentially disadvantaging them. Third, it raises concerns about the homogenisation of knowledge within networked learning, positing that the quest for a universal online educational experience inadvertently favours Western perspectives at the expense of indigenous or local knowledge systems.

This Research

The primary aim of this research is to undertake a comprehensive investigation into the dynamics at play within online postgraduate education, with a specific focus on the marginalisation experienced by students who do not align with dominant Western discourses. This issue becomes even more critical at the postgraduate level, where students are expected to transition from mere knowledge consumers to active knowledge producers. It is crucial

for postgraduate students to be able to generate knowledge that aligns closely with their local values and expectations (HEFCE, 2013).

Consequently, this research seeks to address the following central research question: How does the dominance of Western-centric discourse in online postgraduate education colonise knowledge and identities? In this phenomenological study, I aim to explore how individuals navigate these colonial structures and position themselves within these dynamics. The goal is to illuminate the complexities of being perceived as 'different' or 'other' in online spaces and to shed light on the prevalence of Western-centric approaches to knowledge utilisation and identity management.

Methodology

This research is rooted in phenomenology, an approach aimed at understanding the lived experiences of individuals within a particular context (Limberg, 2008). This method allowed for a deep exploration of participants' subjective experiences, emphasising the importance of the context, which was essential given the diverse cultural backgrounds of the participants and the Western-centric nature of networked education. To explore the intricate dynamics surrounding the dominance of Western-centric discourse in online postgraduate education and its impact on knowledge and identities, semi-structured interviews were conducted as the primary data collection method. The participants were aware of the research's objectives, allowing us to dive directly into the topic. Given their status as postgraduate students, they possessed a certain level of familiarity with postcolonial discourses. Consequently, our conversation was straightforward and unreserved; we didn't shy away from addressing specific concepts or situations. The study encompasses a total of 18 postgraduate participants, each offering unique insights and perspectives on the research questions. However, the narratives and perspectives of four individuals will be highlighted due to constraints related to space and word count. It is important to note that all participant names utilised are pseudonyms, and their personal identities have been carefully anonymised.

Participants (Co-knowledge producers)

Participant 1 - Priya Mendis (Cultural Heritage Researcher): Priya, with roots in Colombo, Sri Lanka, undertook her undergraduate studies in History and Cultural Studies at a university in Colombo. Her unwavering passion for history and culture led her to pursue a postgraduate program in Cultural Heritage Studies at a British university. Currently working as a Cultural Heritage Researcher in Colombo, Sri Lanka, Priya is deeply committed to preserving and promoting Sri Lankan cultural heritage. Her role encompasses extensive research on cultural practices, historical artifacts, and the enduring impact of colonial legacies on Sri Lankan culture. In addition, she collaborates closely with local museums and heritage organisations to curate exhibitions and educational programs, with her work playing a pivotal role in safeguarding and sharing the rich cultural heritage of Sri Lanka.

Participant 2 - Amina Magombo (Aspiring Nurse): Amina, a native of Dodoma, Tanzania, boasts a background marked by fervent advocacy for girls' education in rural areas. She completed her bachelor's degree in education at a university in Dar es Salaam and is now embarking on her journey to becoming a nurse by pursuing a master's degree in international development at a British university. Her aspiration as an aspiring nurse is deeply rooted in her commitment to providing quality healthcare services in her community. Amina's strong desire is to specialise in maternal and child health, with the ultimate aim of making a significant impact on healthcare outcomes, particularly for women and children in rural Tanzania. Her studies in England represent a crucial steppingstone toward achieving her goal of becoming a compassionate and skilled nurse, contributing to enhanced health and well-being in her region.

Participant 3 - Kwame Owusu (Instructor and Community Development Specialist): Kwame serves as a junior instructor in the field of Social Sciences. Hailing from a university in Ghana, he embarked on his academic journey to pursue a Ph.D. in Development Studies at a British university. In his capacity as a Junior Instructor and Community Development Specialist, Kwame specialises in the fields of Social Sciences and Community Development. He actively participates in teaching and research activities, seeking to make meaningful contributions to community development projects in Ghana. His work involves close collaborations with local communities, NGOs, and governmental agencies to implement sustainable development initiatives that effectively address the specific needs and challenges within his local context.

Participant 4 - Saba Khan (Educational Consultant and Girls' Education Activist): Saba's journey unfolds in Lahore, Pakistan, where she has accumulated valuable experience as an educational consultant and an activist fervently dedicated to promoting girls' education in rural areas. Her expertise is rooted in Educational Policy and Development, and she is currently pursuing a PhD degree in international education at a British university. Her

professional profile is characterised by influential roles in advocating for educational policy and development projects, with a primary focus on expanding access to education for girls in rural Pakistan. Saba's work thrives on collaborative efforts with governmental bodies, NGOs, and local communities, all driven by the common goal of developing and implementing initiatives that address the persistent gender disparities in education. Her role as an Educational Consultant and Girls' Education Activist is pivotal in advancing the cause of girls' education and effecting social change in Pakistan.

Western-Centric Education and Disconnection from Local Realities

I began by inquiring about their encounters with the experience of being perceived as the "other". All four participants have expressed challenges in navigating Western-centric educational systems in England.

> Researcher: Can you share your engagement with the materials and your work as a Cultural Heritage Researcher?
> Priya: Oh, absolutely. See, it's like this room full of people from different parts of the world, including my peers in the online course. I enjoy discussing my perspectives, but sometimes it feels like we're all speaking different dialects. You know, it's like when I talk about my Sri Lankan cultural heritage, it's like speaking a language that my friends in the course don't quite get.
> Researcher: And what does it mean to you?
> Priya: [without hesitation] Disconnection
> Researcher: Could you give me a specific example of this disconnect, especially when discussing with your peers?
> Priya: Sure thing. There was this one time when we were discussing the concept of cultural preservation. [thinking] I was all enthusiastic about how we do it back in Sri Lanka, but some of my peers seemed a bit lost. [thinking] It's like I was sharing my family's secret recipe, and they were trying to cook something else entirely. It's not that they didn't want to understand, but sometimes, our cultural flavours just didn't match.

This was a common theme. For example, Amina articulated that "The Western-centric discourse affects [her] daily life as an aspiring nurse in Tanzania". She says: "it's like trying to fit the pieces of a puzzle that don't quite match. The knowledge I gain in the programme often feels out of sync with the healthcare reality I experience in my community." Saba echoes Amina's perspectives. For her, "out of sync" is manifest as "fairy tale":

> Saba: It's like reading fairy tales while dealing with the harsh realities of girls' education in rural areas.
> Researcher: What exactly do you mean by that?
> Saba: What I meant is that the academic materials often present a somewhat idealistic view of education and change, especially in the context of girls' education in rural Pakistan. It's like reading stories with perfect endings, where everything magically falls into place. [However], the real work I do in Pakistan involves grappling with complex challenges and uncertainties, where the outcomes are not always as predictable or optimistic as the narratives in the academic world. So, the dissonance between the academic materials and my work can sometimes make it feel like I'm reading something more idealised while my reality is grounded in more critical and challenging work.

Perspectives above reflects what Bhabha (1994) calls of dislocation: they grapple with education that doesn't always align with their unique contexts when Western knowledge systems and ideals are imposed.

Priya, Amina, Kwame, and Saba have all voiced concerns about the disconnection between the theoretical education they receive in the West and the practical realities they face in their home countries. This disconnect represents a form of colonialism where Western ideals and knowledge are often detached from the local, non-Western context. I wanted to know what this disconnection means to them:

> Kwame: This disconnection signifies that the academic knowledge I'm acquiring doesn't always align with the development work I do in Ghana. [changed tone] Back in Ghana, I'm all about getting my hands dirty with community development projects. I've seen the nitty-gritty, the challenges, and the unique needs of our communities. But, and it's a big 'but,' [laughs] the theoretical stuff I'm getting here in the West sometimes feels like it's from a different planet, you know what I mean? I do appreciate the new perspectives, but there's a real need to bridge the gap

[between] what we're learning and how we can actually use it [back] home for our community development work in Ghana.

Spivak (2012) calls this "Pragmatic Responses - Strategic Essentialism". While they acknowledge the disconnection between Western education and their home countries' practical realities, they don't reject Western education outright. Instead, they seek to bridge the gap between theory and practice. For example, for Priya it means that "there's a gap between the knowledge [she is] gaining and its practical application in preserving and promoting Sri Lankan cultural heritage". Similarly, Saba describes that the "education she is receiving sometimes feels too optimistic and detached from the harsh realities of girls' education in rural Pakistan". The stark contrast between idealism and pragmatism can be seen as a form of strategic essentialism, where they temporarily simplify their identities and experiences for the sake of effective communication with Western educational systems.

Cultural and Epistemic Violence through convivial technologies

The issue of what knowledge holds value is a persistent challenge in education, especially as curricula inherently decide what to teach. However, when Western knowledge predominates, and non-Western perspectives are systematically disregarded, students can become victims of epistemic violence, a concept highlighted by Spivak. This violence represents the suppression and marginalisation of non-Western ways of understanding the world. Spivak's notion is evident in the experiences of the participants, who grapple with translating their non-Western experiences into the Western educational framework, often resulting in the loss of their authentic voices and the erasure of their unique cultural and epistemic backgrounds.

One might argue that these are merely differences of opinion among participants or dissatisfaction with their learning materials. Particularly in the context of networked learning, isn't disagreement or resonance necessary for the utilization and sharing of knowledge? I directly questioned them about whether this was a clash of different perspectives, and not only was their response consistent, but they also used similar language. They shared the perspective that they often find themselves needing to adapt and accept others' viewpoints. Amina and Kwame had similar experiences; for Amina, it meant refraining from "focusing on specific points [she wishes] to delve into further because [she felt like she was] dominating the conversation," while for Kwame, it meant agreeing with perspectives he couldn't "align with, as otherwise, he appeared to not grasp the concept." All four participants were clear that they contributed more than they received during discussions. Priya, drawing from culinary analogies, described her perspectives as "always the spice, not the main dish," and she continued:

> Priya: Well, you see, in our discussions on preserving cultural heritage, I often find myself sharing real-life examples of how things are done in Sri Lanka. While I appreciate the interest, it's sometimes a one-way street. It would be great if people had more [varied] vocabulary than "oh, how authentic".

Bhabha's concept of hybridity and negotiation is pertinent to understanding Priya's viewpoint. Priya does not outright reject colonial legacies, but she also doesn't wholeheartedly embrace them. Instead, she is engaged in negotiating a third space, a space where her perspective and identity intersect with and transcend the colonial influences. A similar illustration of this negotiation can be observed in Amina's explanation.

> Amina: In our healthcare discussions, I frequently draw from health-related problems in Tanzania and the challenges [health] workers face in clinics. I'm more than happy to share, but I don't know how I feel when I constantly hear how bad some cultures are in sub-saharan Africa or Africa in general. [pause] it is not bad. There are problem, yes, [pause] yes, but it is not bad culture. I don't say how bad English culture is anytime i am having problems here.

A close examination of Priya and Amina's statements highlights that they are subjected to a reductive form of colonialism, attempting to navigate the Western education system where they are often simplistically categorized as either "authentic" or "problematic." This situation aligns with what Said terms as Orientalism. The crystalline example of this phenomenon is evident in Saba's words.

> Saba: I used to share the realities of our work in Pakistan. But I stopped. A ah. No, not anymore. I am not here to hear how underdeveloped Pakistan is, or how oppressive religion can be. That's not my point. [pause] I know these problems already. That's why I am an activist. [pause] I know the problems already and I don't need to hear them from you. But the real problem is that [stopped] I

5

am muslim and a woman. I am getting the highest level of education. So it can't be religion. To me, the problem is to accept the problems in Pakistan while also defend myself.

The perspectives shared by these four participants vividly exemplify the concept of epistemic violence. They grapple with the limitations of expressing their viewpoints within a dominant discourse, where their unique perspectives remain largely underrepresented. As a consequence, they frequently find themselves shouldering the burden of providing peripheral knowledge. This asymmetry in knowledge sharing underscores a crucial issue within the realm of networked learning: subaltern voices encounter considerable difficulties when attempting to articulate their views and experiences within prevailing educational systems.

Conclusion/ Discussion

This research showed that the dominance of Western-centric discourse in online postgraduate education not only colonises knowledge by promoting Western cultural norms but also colonises identities by silencing non-Western perspectives and erasing their voices within the digital realm. This dynamic reflects a continuation of colonial power imbalances within the landscape of networked learning. In this specific context, the idealistic notion of collaborative knowledge creation and informed action, founded on trust and a shared sense of challenge, may appear somewhat romantic and perhaps overly simplistic. It is imperative that we delve deeper into our understanding of how collective practices within networked learning might unintentionally perpetuate colonial legacies. The dynamics outlined in the context of the participants' experiences hold important implications for networked learning. As originally defined, networked learning encompasses collaborative, cooperative, and collective practices that aim to foster connections among diverse perspectives and knowledge resources ((NLEC), 2021). However, there are potential concerns regarding how networked learning could, inadvertently or unintentionally, perpetuate colonial discourses.

There are three points to consider:

1. Reinforcement of Dominant Discourses: Networked learning, without critical oversight, risks perpetuating Western-centric discourses. Dominant narratives and structures may overshadow subaltern perspectives, echoing the participants' experiences and reinforcing colonial knowledge hierarchies.

2. Marginalisation of Subaltern Voices: Power imbalances in networked learning can marginalise subaltern voices, compelling conformity to dominant discourse and unequal engagement, paralleling participants' experiences.

3. Imbalance in Knowledge Sharing: Similar to participants, networked learning may exhibit knowledge-sharing disparities, with subaltern voices contributing disproportionately and dominant discourses going unchallenged, impeding a diverse knowledge exchange.

Failure to explicitly address these imperatives in networked learning practices can result in the inadvertent perpetuation of colonial discourses. In the absence of these measures, networked learning risks perpetuating exclusionary dynamics, consequently impeding its potential to challenge and dismantle colonial discourses.

As a limitation, this research primarily focuses on the experiences and interactions of non-western students within networked learning environments. Future research could extend this focus to include an examination of interactions and experiences of both western and non-western students. Exploring how western students engage with non-western peers and discuss shared issues may offer valuable insights into the dynamics of cross-cultural interaction and provide new learning perspectives for all students involved.

he overarching conclusion drawn from this study underscores the imperative for further exploration of networked learning within the framework of post-colonial theory. This extension of inquiry is necessary to deepen our comprehension of how to effectively confront and mitigate the perpetuation of colonial discourses within educational contexts. Furthermore, there is a notable lacuna in the current research focus, particularly concerning the examination of interactions and experiences of both Western and non-Western students within networked learning environments. Incorporating such an investigation would not only elucidate cross-cultural dynamics but also offer novel insights and learning perspectives for all participants involved, thus enriching scholarly discourse in the field

References

Ahmed, S. (2000). *Strange encounters embodied others in post-coloniality*. Routledge.

Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. Taylor & Francis.

Bullingham, L., & Vasconcelos, A. C. (2013). 'The presentation of self in the online world': Goffman and the study of online identities. *Journal of Information Science*, *39*(1), 101–112. https://doi.org/10.1177/0165551512470051

Harasim, L. (2000). Shift Happens: Online Education as a New Paradigm in Learning. *The Internet and Higher Education*, *3*(1–2), 41–61. https://doi.org/10.1016/s1096-7516(00)00032-4

HEFCE. (2013). *Rates of qualification from postgraduate research degrees: Projected study outcomes of full-time students starting postgraduate research degrees in 2010-11.* http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2013/201317/

Jorissen, S. L., Keen, J. P., & Riedel, E. S. (2015). Online Ph.D. Program Delivery Models and Student Success. *American Journal of Distance Education*, *29*(4), 232–247.

Limberg, L. B. (2008). Phenomenography. In L. M. Given (Ed.), *The SAGE encyclopedia of qualitative research methods* (pp. 612–614). SAGE. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412963909

(NLEC), N. L. E. C. (2021). Networked Learning: Inviting Redefinition. *Postdigital Science and Education*, *3*(2), 312–325. https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-020-00167-8

Oztok, M. (2019). *The Hidden Curriculum of Online Learning: Understanding Social Justice through Critical Pedagogy*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429284052

Rajasingham, L. (2011). The E-Learning Phenomenon: A New University Paradigm? In M. Stansfield & T. Connolly (Eds.), *Virtual Communities: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools and Applications* (pp. 161–181). IGI Global.

Said D., E. (1993). *Culture and Imperialism*. Vintage Books.

Spivak, G. C. (1999). *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*. Harvard University Press.

Spivak, G. C. (2012). *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*. Harvard University Press.

Warschauer, M. (2003). *Technology and Social Inclusion: Rethinking the Digital Divide*. The MIT Press.