UK Covid-19 Policies, Decoloniality, and Online Learning: A Qualitative Inquiry of Indian Female Students' Experiences

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This working paper aims to share the initial conceptualisations, and experiences of community and online learning with female Indian students labelled 'international' by a university in the North of England. The complex relationship between Britain and India has resulted in generations of trauma and a current nationalist state in India, the capitulation of the Indian economy through rogue trading laws and the dismantling of the Indian autocracy. However, Britain's entanglement with India continues to be of national debate. This feeds into Britain's exuberant history of being superior. Further exposure to the controversy of empire needs to be maintained through active discussion of the communities that already exist and continue to expand within the UK. As well as this, the added complexity of the health pandemic covid-19 has resulted in a shift of physical learning and social communities being moved online. The research methodology was designed with the participants to be co-researchers, creating interview questions, interviewing the principal researcher, and helping to develop phase two of the data collection. The qualitative data collection was split into two phases, this paper will focus on phase one, an online one-to-one conversational interview. The preliminary analysis suggests that conceptualisation of community has been disrupted by the pandemic, with a strong focus on individual growth; online learning experiences were reported as negative; finally, there was a shared connection to the trauma that was created by the empire in India to the current political state India is in. Narrative inquiry and reciprocal interviewing were used through the data collection process and decolonial, feminist, community theories and frameworks were used to help contextualise the data.

Key words: decoloniality; co-participant researchers; community; online learning; empire

Review of Literature

India's relationship with migration is extensive due to colonialism, transnational trade, education, and globalisation (Kumar, Sarkar, and Sharma, 2009; Arora, 2007). Particularly, the historical connections between the UK and India, have created an Indian education system based on the British (Arora, 2007). In addition, after China, Indian student migration to the UK is the second-largest student group to study in the UK. They are supported by an increased investment in STEM and are an emerging power within the knowledge economy (King, and Sondhi, 2018). Conducting this research in a university in the North of England provides an opportunity for insight into the intersections of empire, student migration, community, and the changing scape of higher education during the pandemic. Indian women are a group that contributes significantly to the cultural and economic context of both Indian and British economies (King and Sondhi, 2018). King and Sondhi's 2018 study on barriers for Indian students labelled international in the UK found that Indian female students labelled international felt increased pressure to maintain Indian culture. How has Indian culture been affected during a time of increased historical and political awareness?

On the 11th of March 2019, the World Health Organisation declared the coronavirus a global health pandemic. The covid-19 pandemic brought many challenges to the higher education community. UK covid-19 policies in UK Higher Education were to have universities locally manage the virus; universities were responsible for safe teaching and learning through blended learning (online and in-person teaching) (Hodges, 2020). Therefore, university policies were different depending on the institution the student was attending. Campuses were emptied, with curriculums being modified to fit online delivery with the technology already in place, as well as learning how to manage online learning, and navigating multiple online platforms at once (Perrotta, 2020). Despite online learning becoming central to university teaching, Lederman (2020) reported that academics had little to no online teaching experience, with only an estimated 50% of institutions equipped with educators with the relevant experience. Ultimately, this reflected a short-term pandemic pedagogy which failed to look beyond short-term student impact and engagement (Williamson, Eynon, and Potter, 2020).

This also affected the formation and the maintenance of a community. Community in this project, will be defined as organic connections to history through the production and reproduction of knowledge about the future (Goodyear-Ka'opua, 2012). Despite community typically being limited to geographical location, technology reduces these boundaries (Luo, Zhang, and Qi, 2017). An online community will be understood as virtual spaces for people with similar interests to share resources and knowledge (Hsu and Liao, 2014).

This project aims to use decolonialism as a guidance to liberate occupied knowledge and highlight the colonial thinking that is prevalent within our communities. Decolonialism therefore will be interpreted as the reimagining of the colonial systems and hierarchies that have been in place as a result of empire and imperialism within society (Dunford, 2017; Tlostanova and Mignolo, 2009). It is the working of reworking the layered, complex imaginings beyond capitalism that affect lifestyles, morals, and structures of authority. It is necessary to introduce ideas and knowledge from the experience of colonialism to approach global citizenship (Mignolo, 2002).

Rational for Research

This research's focus is on female Indian students labelled international at a university in the North of England discussing their understanding and experiences of community and online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. Semi-structured online interviews conducted in a conversational style were used as a part of the data collection. Multiple theories were used to support this project (decolonial, exploratory practice frameworks, community of practice, and Bakhtinian analysis). This research will be framed by the following questions: how do female Indian students labelled international conceptualise communities during their learning experiences at a university in the North of England? How have events such as covid-19 and remote learning impacted the online learning experiences of female Indian students labelled international at a university in the North of England?

The Method

This research project engaged collaboratively with Indian female international participants and gave them the title of coresearcher. They were recruited through emails sent to faculties, departments, and societies at the university. The narratives of Bunny, a post-graduate taught business student and Alexis a final year communications and management student, will be shared in this paper. This research project used the qualitative method of one-to-one interviewing, carried out online to reflect the changes in teaching at universities. The method is influenced by decolonial principles (Tlostonova and Mignolo (2009) and exploratory framework guidelines (Hanks, 2017). The topics of conversation were discussed between the coresearcher and the lead researcher before the data collection via email. To continue the decolonial practice and to balance power between the lead researcher and coresearcher's were encouraged to treat the interview as a conversation using reciprocal questioning (Dempsey, 2018). The interviews lasted approximately 1hr 45 minutes.

Data Analysis - Preliminary Findings

The following is an overview of the preliminary narratives that emerged from the first round of data collection. Bakhtinian dialogic analysis was used to engage with the friction and tensions to create the narratives that will be presented. The findings and lead researcher interpretations were shared with the coresearchers for edits, revisions, and comments. The three shared narratives were the following: the community is a place, both physical and non-physical, of belonging that allowed them to be with like-minded others, but this came with the fear of losing their sense of self and individuality; an individuality and sense of self that has been reinvigorated by the pandemic and allowing for time to explore the self. The current political and societal issues in India were also discussed. Current Indian political issues were linked to the leaving of the British Empire and the recreation of their national image as a competitive global power that has resulted in a loss of Indian culture. The third shared narrative was the poor experiences of online learning and their expectations of the teacher, learner, and learning environment and how this linked back to colonial hierarchies and global power. Due to limited space, I will discuss the online learning experiences of the co-researchers.

Online learning for both co-researchers was expressed negatively. They shared significant tensions with the teaching delivery, change of learning environment, and engagement with the content. Despite

having separate interviews, both co-researchers felt strongly about the lack of engagement with their lectures because their home environment could not replicate the focus a designated lecture hall or classroom would create. This brought into question the level of preparedness of higher education for the digitalisation of learning (Houlden and Veletsianos, 2020). This was not helped by the government's statement of intent for higher education, which spotlighted large lectures to be moved online and small group seminars to remain open (McKie, 2020) but this varies for courses and universities.

Bunny believed that learning efficiently requires a teacher that is engaged with the learner, but interaction with the students is not necessary. Bunny felt that there was something lost among teachers between students when they were not sharing knowledge within the classroom. The increased lack of engagement and makeshift approach for this stopgap learning can be ascribed to the university institution becoming a government asset (Dearing Report, 1997). Alexis felt that the teacher had a responsibility to hold students accountable for their learning, including attending the lessons and having engaging teaching methods. This way of teaching and learning can be interpreted as the power being ingrained within the institution, coming from the teacher through a single pathway, as opposed to a passageway of learning where both teachers and learners share knowledge.

Alexis and Bunny admire the value of a UK education and hierarchise it above the education they would have received in India if they were to have remained at home. They believe that coming to the UK for their higher education would provide more opportunities for when they would return. The hierarchy and value of British education are emphasised with Alexis's perception of international study as a way to take knowledge from the institution to take back and develop that area of expertise in their home country. The international student is not deemed to have valuable knowledge fitting into the existing established world order created by colonialism for which countries are leaders and which are developing. This is continually being supported by the status that 'good' education provides countries when competing globally. This is reiterated with universities that have been driven to a state-regulated market through standardisation measurements, such as the teaching excellence framework since 2015, the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, and since 2018, the creation of the Office for Students (Filippakou and Tapper, 2019). The education system needs to be questioned concerning how knowledge is seen as a commodity to increase the country's status as a global power. The enforced changes to Higher Education have focused on management and technology management as opposed to the execution of teaching and learning (Ma et al, 2020).

Conclusion and Future Considerations

This research project looked to explore the preliminary narratives of Indian female students, labelled international, at a university in the North of England. The one-to-one interviews highlighted the complexity of community during the pandemic, the linking of India's current state politics with the British Empire and student expectations of themselves, the teacher, and the environment. Colonialism and the history between India and Britain has left a lasting impact on the co-researchers. The next stage of this research is to continue the decolonial approach and work toward creating a second data collection method that has been informed and collaborated on with the coresearchers. The initial narratives that have emerged will be looked to be explored further, to have a deeper understanding of the effects of colonialism and the pandemic.

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