

Woke & — Resistance

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June 2024

This toolkit was developed as part of the **Woke&Resistance** project, which took place at the University of Humanistic Studies between September 2022 and July 2024.

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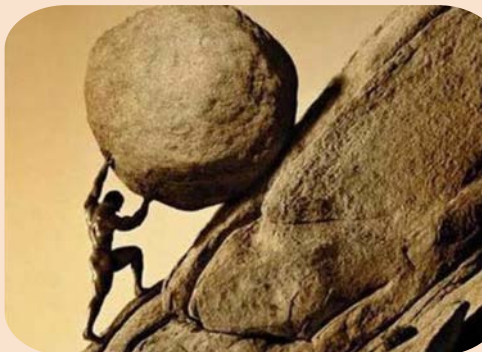


Introduction

This toolkit offers insights into the working methods, experiences and lessons from the **Woke&Resistance** project. The aim is to inspire students and staff in higher education to address institutional racism, epistemic justice and decolonization in fruitful and concrete ways.

The project started in 2022, in the wake of the global Black Lives Matter movement and related critical questions about (higher) education ("why is my curriculum so white?"). At the University of Humanistic Studies (UoH), a group of students organized themselves under the name Pluralistics and carried out a curriculum scan that confirmed their suspicion of institutional racism. When they made these findings public, a hostile atmosphere arose instead of a constructive dialogue. This was the reason to start the project, for which Caroline Suransky received a Comenius-NRO Senior Fellowship grant. A grant that is intended for educational innovations that explicitly benefit students. The project brought together students and staff as agonists (critical cooperatives) rather than antagonists, using terms of political philosopher Chantal Mouffe. In dialogue meetings and workshops, conflicting issues were translated into curriculum revision in concrete ways, making room for diverse views. In retrospect, we conclude that increasing polarization has only made the goal of the project more urgent.

We have experienced that changing the organizational culture and curriculum of a university requires continuous dialogue and collaboration. There are no 'quick fixes' available. During the project, Professor Anthony Pinn, inspired by the myth of Sisyphus, gave an inspiring answer to the question of whether dialogue about racism is useful. He argued that striving for a world without racism is comparable to Sisyphus' endless task of pushing a boulder up a mountain. Although the top is never reached, the effort itself is valuable. For us, this perspective emphasizes that the commitment to a more just university is valuable, even without a definitive solution. Our invitation to you as a reader is not to look for quick solutions, but to be open to our experiences and to translate them into (working) forms that suit your own context.



"The struggle itself towards the top is enough to fill a man's heart. We must imagine Sisyphus as a happy man."

Conclusion of The Myth of Sisyphus

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phase 1

phase 2

phase 3

phase 4

Phase 1

On the agenda

The first step in the project was to systematically engage in conversation about wokeness, academic freedom, institutional racism and decolonization of education. With both online and physical forms of dialogue, we tried to bring as many voices as possible into conversation with each other.

Activities

- Physical noticeboard with relevant (news) articles, information about the project and space to respond to dialogue questions.
- Online 'noticeboard' in the form of [a Padlet](#).
- Dialogue in the Canteen - during lunch breaks, around 80 students and staff members engaged in conversation under the guidance of a senior student. An explanation of the exact implementation can be found on page 8.
- [Blogs by staff and students](#).



Experiences & returns



Discussing woke

The topic is very much alive. In three days, more than 100 responses were posted to statements on the notice board and the online padlet. Some gave positive feedback. They considered woke as an invitation to reconsider the context and to be open to suppressed voices, which is seen as enriching and conducive to academic freedom. Critical voices described woke as being out of touch with reality, call it 'woke police' and pointed out that 'white men' are wrongly portrayed as the perpetrators of all evil.

Where is the resistance?

During the dialogues in the canteen, there was little open criticism. "The project is called Woke and Resistance, but where is the resistance?" a staff member asked afterwards. In this context, social safety is regularly referred to as an important condition for dialogue. Many participants felt it was important to start a conversation and do something concrete with the topic. These were mainly people who had a positive attitude towards 'woke'. Online anonymity apparently offered an easier platform for critical views than face-to-face conversations with colleagues and fellow students.

Not avoiding discomfort

In order to further involve the university community in the project, blogs were shared by project members, in which they discussed their experiences and motivation. A teacher wrote about her dialogue experiences, in which the theme of 'discomfort' often came up. "We should not avoid discomfort" was said. In contrast, it was argued that avoiding discomfort is a privilege. People who deviate from the norm often have no choice, because they are constantly confronted with uncomfortable situations. For them, it is necessary to endure this discomfort in order to participate in public space. A student discussed his experiences as one of the few non-white students of color at the UoH. He reflected on the question of whether he really belongs in academia and emphasized his responsibility, as a black Humanist, to promote social change, drawing inspiration from thinkers such as James Baldwin.

In-depth

Woke and academic freedom

The concept of 'woke' is constantly changing (Stoker et al., 2023). Initially, it referred to the awareness of institutional racism and social inequality in African American communities. The term gained wider prominence through the Black Lives Matter movement, which focused on racism, colonialism and the decolonization of Western identity. Anti-racism was explicitly linked to other emancipation movements and thus became an intersectional struggle. Over time, the term became more used by conservative thinkers than by left-wing activists (Cammaerts, 2022). Woke is used to indicate excessive activism and political correctness, which according to conservative thinkers endangers academic freedom and freedom of expression.

The debate about woke and anti-woke has become heavily politicized both within and outside the academic world (Thomas, 2023). This leads to different issues being lumped together, which hinders a substantive conversation about academic space. 'Woke' is used as a general collective term to criticize what is not liked or to express moral panic. Universities are faced with the challenge of not allowing the discussion about academic freedom to be hijacked by politicized divisions (Stoker et al., 2023). Both woke and anti-woke activists advocate excluding or cancelling each other, or each other's views (Norris, 2023). 'The left' believes that the university should be a safe space where offensive opinions that question the right to exist of marginalized groups are not welcome. The criticism from the self-proclaimed right is that an open debate in which political correctness is not an issue is hampered at the university. Perceptions of cancelling depend on the extent to which individual values fit in with the dominant group culture. Within academia, academics who experience **silencing** are often a minority, or a "fish out of water". This contrast is consistent with Noelle-Neumann's (1974, 1984) **spiral of silence** thesis. Her thesis is that dominant values in a group gradually blossom into the dominant culture, while dissenting minority voices are silenced under social pressure. This **ratchet effect** ultimately leads to the suppression of dissenters. Research by Norris (2021) suggests that **cancel culture** is not just a rhetorical myth; academics are less willing to defend their moral convictions when they believe that their views are not widely shared by their colleagues or the broader society to which they belong.

Tool

Dialogue in the canteen Socratic agonistic dialogue

Duration:	30 - 50 minutes
Number of participants:	4-10 per table
Objective:	to put important (sensitive) topics on the agenda and to bring different voices into conversation in an accessible space.

Explanation

A Socratic dialogue helps to analyze an (ethical) issue. Examining your own assumptions is central to this (Kessels, 2014, p. 89). By discussing a case and continuously asking questions, participants get a clear picture of the situation and discover what is at the heart of the matter for them (Kessels, 2014, pp. 44-45). In an agonistic dialogue there is explicit room for opposing views (Suransky & Alma, 2017). Agonism recognizes the importance of conflicting perspectives and sees them as valuable.

The 'little time - good conversation' method makes it possible to conduct structured Socratic research in a short period of time (Kessels et al., 2015, pp. 58-59). Ideally, there should be a discussion leader at each dialogue table who is familiar with the method. Discussion leaders (student or staff member) are responsible for monitoring the process and time (see step-by-step plan). Before the start of the dialogue, discussion rules are agreed upon. All participants at the table are responsible for adhering to them.

Proposal for discussion rules

1. Listen actively and respectfully: Everyone must be prepared to listen attentively to each other and show respect for different perspectives. This promotes an open and safe environment in which participants can speak freely. It may be useful to make a distinction between a 'safe space' and a 'brave space', with the latter offering space for agonistic dialogue (see: [From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces](#)).
2. Examine your own assumptions: Self-examination is central. Constantly ask yourself why you have certain views and be prepared to revise them based on new insights that emerge during the conversation.
3. Embrace opposing views: Do not see conflicting opinions as obstacles, but as opportunities for deepening. Be open to discussion and use opposing perspectives to better understand the subject and gain a broader insight.

Requirements

Dialogue tables with sufficient prints of the step-by-step plan, the case or central question and large A3 sheets on which participants can note central questions and essences.

Step-by-step plan 'Little time - good conversation'

Time: 30 - 60 minutes

Topic: State a central question or a recognizable case for the participants (see examples)

Step 1 (±5min)

Questions: What questions does this raise? What do you not understand (yet) or what questions should definitely be asked? Collect as many questions as possible (in keywords) on the A3 paper in max. 5 minutes.

Step 2 (±15min)

Experiences: What experiences do you have that are relevant to this question/case?

Responses: Which questions and experiences do you want to respond to? What would you like to know more about? What do you think differently about? Jointly investigate, critically, but open to the input of others.

Step 3 (±5min)

The essence: Based on this short conversation, what do you think this question/case is about? What is a core/hot spot? Write the essentials (in keywords) on the A3 paper.

Step 4 (±5min)

Reflection: What was it like to do this? What went well? What could be done differently in the future? If possible, do this briefly in one word per person if you are short on time.

Examples of dialogue questions

- What are your associations with the term 'woke'?
- What do you think 'woke' means for academic freedom?
- What are your experiences with institutional racism in 'higher' education?
- What ideas do you have about decolonizing education?
- What does epistemic justice mean to you?
- How do we deal with diverse backgrounds and positions of authors, knowledge and literature?
- Which forms of education stimulate decolonization? What exactly does that mean?
- How do you, as a student and staff member, enter into discussions about diversity in the curriculum?
- What should a student learn in preparation for working and living in a pluralistic society?
- How should universities deal with complex international conflicts, such as the war in Gaza?
- How do you do justice to social engagement and at the same time ensure that the university continues to play a critical, scientific role?

Examples of cases

Case: Criticism of Kant - Diversity/background of authors

The philosophy of Immanuel Kant is introduced during a course on Ethics*. The lecturer mentions the philosopher's year of birth and death and the place of birth and then discusses a prescribed text by Kant himself. A student interrupts the lecture with a question: "Sorry, but isn't there also a lot of criticism of Kant? Because of racism and sexism in his thinking?" The lecturer indicates that it is important to first understand Kant himself before you can make criticism. "Let's first understand the philosophy, separately from the person. Otherwise you are already interpreting the philosophy on the basis of criticism, which is not the intention."

Should the 'work', in this case Kant's philosophy, be discussed and understood separately from the person before discussing any criticism? Or is it important to first know more about the background and critique in order to better understand the philosophy?

How do you, as a student and lecturer, properly discuss this in class?

Case: Aware of privileges

At the UoH, much attention is paid to humanization in Dutch society in a course in the Bachelor of Humanities*. The lecturer finds it important to incorporate the subject of anti-racism into the course and devotes a lecture to it with an appropriate working method. During the lecture, students are asked to reflect on their own privileges. "Oh no, not again" sighs one student, "I reflected so many times on my privileges, positioned myself using intersectional thinking, reflected on what it means to be white. Enough awareness, when are we really going to get started? When does it really get uncomfortable?".

How can UoH education prepare students (better) for working and living in a dynamic, pluralistic society? What knowledge and skills should be offered in the courses?

*A specific subject is deliberately not mentioned, so as not to link specific teachers or students to the case. During the discussion, fill in the case based on your own experiences.

Phase 2

Exploring & Designing

Various experts advised and guided lecturers and student assistants in revising education in the field of diversity, inclusion and decolonization. There was some resistance, but fortunately mainly enthusiasm. They indicated that they wanted practical tools, time and space to investigate together what decolonization actually is and how to translate that into education practices.

Activities

- Stay of the American visiting professor Anthony B. Pinn, a leading expert in the field of humanism and racism:
 - Socrates lecture: Anthony Pinn Humanist Association, for more than 300 attendees, followed by a panel discussion with influential people in the (anti) racism debate in the Netherlands.
 - A talk by Anthony B. Pinn: opening of the exhibition 'Colonialism within the walls of the UoH', followed by a lecture and panel discussion.
 - A movie night with Anthony B. Pinn: film and dialogue evening, with the film 'Herskovits at the Heart of Blackness'.
 - A reading group with Anthony B. Pinn: reading group and discussion meeting.
 - Reading table in the library with work on education, (anti)racism and decolonization.
- Public lecture by Max de Ploeg on decolonization and higher education.
- Three workshops on educational innovation by Pravini Baboeram of the Expertise Center for Diversity Policy (ECHO). Lecturers and student assistants were able to evaluate and revise their own module/subject/course (learning objectives, working methods, literature, examination).
- Inspiration meetings and intervision group for students whose graduation research ties in with issues concerning anti-racism, institutional whiteness, decolonization and related themes.
- Blogs from the project team ([read here](#)).



Experiences & returns

Tell Us: What Should We Do?

Prof. Anthony B. Pinn, prominent African American Professor of Religious Studies at Rice University, gave the 2023 Socrates Lecture in collaboration with the Humanist Association. In his lecture, Pinn focused on the “**grinding discomfort**” between humanism and racism. He argued that despite the ideals of freedom and equality, racism remains deeply rooted in humanist circles. Pinn emphasizes that we need to take concrete steps to address racial inequalities. He advocates a critical approach to knowledge production and education, in which colonial structures and thought patterns are questioned and dismantled. His statement “**Don’t ask me how to solve it, I didn’t create the problem,**” points to the need to understand and share responsibility for racism rather than simply expecting solutions from those affected by it.

Deep historical roots

Max de Ploeg gave a public lecture on decolonization in higher education. Max de Ploeg, a well-known decolonial thinker and community builder in the Netherlands, has played an important role in various grassroots movements and is a co-founder of Aralez, a decolonial network in Amsterdam. His lecture provided historical context and inspiration for both students and staff. He stated: “**If colonialism is a body, universities are the brain**”. De Ploeg emphasized that academic research is closely linked to the worst excesses of colonialism. This is still deeply insulting to colonized peoples. He referred, among other things, to the work “Decolonizing Methodologies” by Linda Tuhiwai Smith.

Goodwill that collides with thresholds

Pravini Baboeram (ECHO) led workshops in which lecturers and students critically reflected on their teaching practice and teaching materials, with a focus on decolonization. The workshops emphasized that decolonization goes beyond diversity and inclusion (D&I). D&I mainly adds something to an existing framework. Decolonisation critiques the existing framework and the underlying (knowledge) system with the aim of questioning and breaking through deeply rooted colonial thought patterns within the university.

The participants shared their interest and goodwill, but clashed on the question of what decolonisation exactly entails and whether it is necessary. There were different views on what decolonisation means for the university as an institution, how it affects what is considered legitimate academic knowledge and to what extent individual subjects can be decolonised.

The workshops led to questions such as: “**Who produced this knowledge and why?**” and “**Which voices are not heard?**”. Reflections were shared about what students are unlearning, such as suspending judgement. Some wondered whether students could better learn to critically examine their judgements in order to become aware of their positionality. Finally, it was emphasised that more space for reflection, discussion with colleagues and students and the development of skills is needed on these topics. Universities still have a lot to learn.

In-depth

Decolonizing Higher Education

The work of Achille Mbembe and Linda Tuhiwai Smith offers a number of important insights into the decolonization of higher education.

Achille Mbembe is one of the great African thinkers of our time and an influential voice in the international post- and decolonial debate. He examines how racial knowledge is produced and reproduced in modern societies. In doing so, he argues that racism is not a matter of individual prejudices, but is deeply embedded in Western epistemologies and systems of knowledge. This means that decolonizing universities involves more than just curriculum change; it requires a fundamental overhaul of the underlying structures that shape knowledge production and education and lead to hierarchies and exclusion. Decolonization, according to Mbembe, entails dismantling these structures and recognizing and integrating indigenous and non-Western knowledges.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith is Emeritus Professor of Indigenous Studies at the University of Waikato in New Zealand. In her book '**Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples**', she discusses how Western research practices often clash with indigenous knowledges. She argues that decolonizing education is not only about what is taught, but also how and by whom. This implies that indigenous communities need to actively participate in the design and implementation of research and educational programs. Furthermore, she emphasizes the importance of holistic approaches to time and space, which differ from Western views. She advocates for educational models that focus on community care and conservation, recognizing the interconnectedness of all living beings.

Both thinkers emphasize that decolonizing higher education requires a profound transformation of the structures, methodologies and content of education and educational institutions. This process requires a critical reflection on the colonial legacy and the active involvement of indigenous and non-Western knowledge sources in order to create an inclusive and equitable educational landscape.

Tool

Conversation on feet Space to doubt and determine a position.

Duration:	1.5 - 2 hours
Number of participants:	10 to 30
Objective:	dynamic discussion that leads to insight into one's own positions and understanding of those of others.

In the book '**Spreeken en Zijn**' (Speaking and Being), Kübra Gümüşay argues for the importance of language in shaping our reality and combating discrimination. This tool is an elaboration of her call:

"That is exactly what is needed: hesitation, doubt. The ability to change your mind. The ability to question your own position. We need places where we can think – not to show how good we are and how much we know, but how much we don't know but want to find out."

– Gümüşay (2022), p.196-197

This working method is inspired by the Deep Democracy method, specifically the 'Conversation on Feet'. In this session, the documentary 'The Uprising' by Pravini Baboeram provided more insight into colonialism and racism in Europe.

Requirements

- Large space with enough room to move
- Paper and markers + writing materials for participants
- Additional theory or video material to deepen the subject

Preparation

1. **Central statement:** Write down the central statement for the discussion in a clearly visible place. For example, a statement such as: "Woke language is useful to prevent discrimination."
2. **Prepare floor anchors:** Write different points of view on sheets of paper and place them on the floor, spread throughout the room. Examples of points of view:
 - "Words are hurtful"
 - "Political change first requires language change"
 - "You don't change much about racism with new words"
 - "You're not allowed to say anything anymore / Focusing on language limits my freedom of speech"

Execution

1. Introduction (10 minutes)

- Welcome: Welcome the participants and briefly explain the objectives and structure of the session. Introduce the central statement.
- Explanation Working method: Explain that participants take a position in relation to the floor anchors that best represent their opinion. It is not possible to stand in multiple places at the same time. It is possible to move during the conversation. There is no 'neutral' place.

2. Taking a position (30 minutes)

- Presentation of positions: Present the statements written on the floor anchors. Ask the participants to walk around and take a position on the floor anchor that best represents their opinion.
- Discussion: Facilitate an open discussion between the different positions. Encourage participants to change positions if their opinion changes as a result of the conversation. Participants may introduce new positions, which other participants can then join.

3. Halfway - Supplementing with New Information and Deepening (35 minutes):

- Presentation: Share information about decolonization of language, using insights from the documentary 'The Uprising' by Pravini Baboeram or Kübra Gümüşay's book 'Spreken en Zijn'. Discuss how language can contribute to combating discrimination.
- New Positions: Ask the participants whether, based on this new information, there are positions that are missing from the conversation and whether they want representatives to represent those positions.
- In-depth Discussion: Facilitate a second round of discussion, taking into account the new information and positions.

4. Closing (15 minutes)

- Individual Reflection: Ask the participants to write down for themselves:
 - Have you thought things but not said them?
 - Have you experienced irritation or discomfort?
 - What need is underlying this, what would you like from the group / in the conversation?
- Group Reflection: Allow some participants to share their reflections (voluntary) and conclude with a short summary of the key insights.

5. Post Session

- Evaluation: Ask participants to complete a short evaluation about their experiences and what they learned.
- Follow-up Actions: Discuss any follow-up actions or further sessions.

Phase 3

Practicing Educational Change

The third phase of the project focused on deepening the dialogue on colonialism and decolonization of education. Through online exchanges with Stellenbosch University, canteen dialogues and inspiration meetings, we brought together various perspectives. In focus groups and intervision meetings, we evaluated educational innovations. This emphasized the need for practice-oriented learning experiences and space for 'grinding conversations'.

Activities

- Dialogue with Stellenbosch University from South Africa: Eleven students from the UoH and seven students from Stellenbosch University entered into an (online) dialogue with each other about woke, colonialism and decolonization. [A blog was also published about this.](#)
- Dialogue in the canteen about epistemic justice; dealing with the backgrounds and positions of authors, knowledge and literature; forms of education that enhance decolonization. Explanation of the implementation can be found on page 8.
- Inspiration meeting for students whose thesis research ties in with issues concerning the curriculum, anti-racism, institutional whiteness, decolonization, political correctness, etc.
- Intervision meetings with teachers who are working on revising their own subjects.
- Evaluation of the educational change from phase 2 by means of focus groups with students.



Experiences & returns

You are not alone

It proved to be particularly valuable for both students and staff to have the opportunity to exchange ideas and insights with others who consider the same topics important. We organised various meetings where staff and students could meet as equals and learn from each other. For students who focused their thesis research on relevant topics, there was a special inspiration meeting. Using playful working methods, such as the card game Caleidoscopia, students were able to analyse and discuss the various dimensions of their research themes. For lecturers, we organised intervision meetings in which they could share experiences and challenges surrounding decolonisation in their education. These sessions led to follow-up workshops in guiding discussions on decolonial themes by expert Şeydâ Buurman-Kutsal.

Necessary knowledge

The first pilots with decolonising education have led to valuable insights. Lecturers emphasised the importance of transparency about their own doubts on sensitive topics. This openness makes them approachable and offers space for criticism, questions and suggestions from students and colleagues. In addition, it appeared essential that teaching methods and literature focus on critically questioning the majority of the (student) population and the status quo in society, instead of only examining minorities when it comes to diversity, justice and decolonization. Students mainly needed practical applications and action. They want to learn to deal with resistance and to have difficult conversations about color and racism. They find it necessary to include knowledge about the history of racism and enriching literature, such as works by Fanon and Wekker, in the curriculum. The need for concrete and confrontational learning experiences became clear. As did the integration of decolonization in multiple subjects and curricula.

A shared colonial past

During an online dialogue with Stellenbosch University in South Africa, eleven UoH students and seven Stellenbosch students spoke about wokeness, coloniality and decolonization. The aim was to gain insight into how historical and geopolitical contexts influence these themes and how the connection between the Netherlands and South Africa plays a role in this. Students discussed the impact of the colonial past on their daily lives, and specifically on the university. A Stellenbosch student said: **“The decolonization project is relatively new in the Netherlands, but there is an intentional push to advance this goal.”** A UoH student noted: **“Topics of colonialism and apartheid are more recent and/or palpable in South Africa and therefore harder to ignore compared to the Netherlands.”** Another Stellenbosch student found the difference in discussion of race and decolonization between the universities striking: **“Here, they often form the focal point of a section, whereas in the Netherlands they are often side comments.”** UoH students noted: **“We recognize similarities regarding wokeness / decolonial discussions and discomfort.”** The dialogue emphasized that students in both countries need practice-based learning and engaging in abrasive conversations. A UoH student concluded: **“There is still so much to discover in this intercultural exchange.”** The dialogue made clear that there is much to learn from the exchange between different cultural and geopolitical contexts.

Ik wil PRATEN OVER
GAZA + 'IK OOK!' +1 in ook
+1

Translation: "I WANT TO TALK ABOUT GAZA" + "ME TOO!" etc

"We need to talk about Gaza"

The project partly took place in a period in which the war in Israel and Palestine provoked strong reactions in society and at universities, including the University of Humanistic Studies and in the project group itself. In this context, we felt it was important to include current events in the project. Central questions were about the responsibility and position of a university. Students and lecturers emphasized the importance of dialogue about the current situation. There were debates about neutrality, responsibility and the possibility of discussing complex and polarized topics in a nuanced way. There was a need for recognition of the current situation. The university was asked to take a position, which led to discussions about the role of political activism in the academic context. It turned out to be especially important to provide space for dialogue about these issues, where emotions can be seen. This requires attention from the board and the university community. The Dialogue in the canteen method proved valuable for conducting exploratory conversations in which simplified "us-them" contrasts are avoided.

Case November 2023: Discussion in class (Israel - Palestine)

It is the fall of 2023. There is a war going on between Israel and Hamas and there are extreme humanitarian needs in Palestine. This is constantly in the news. At the UoH, a course in the Bachelor of Humanities is being taught about humanization in Dutch society. During a break in the lecture, a group of students address the lecturer. The students are concerned with the war in Gaza and are affected because the subject is not being discussed during the lessons. The teacher does not know how to respond. The teacher indicates that he considers it a very important subject, but also a complex subject that is not easy to discuss in an educational situation. In addition, this course is about other subjects, so the teacher does not think it is appropriate to change the program for this. The students are disappointed. "We are precisely the type of program where this needs to be discussed, regardless of whether it 'fits' or not," says one of them. How should this subject be dealt with at the UoH in your opinion? And how can you, as a lecturer and student, enter into a nuanced dialogue about a subject that is also polarizing (in the media)?

Case May 2024: Positionality of the university

How should universities deal with political activism? At universities and colleges, students and lecturers feel closely involved in the war between Israel and Hamas. Many university boards remain neutral in order to guarantee the free and pluralistic development of knowledge and values. The UoH board was also recently asked to take a position, as happened after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Students for Palestine wrote a letter to the Executive Board, based on the idea that we cannot not position ourselves, even as scientists. According to them, neutrality is an impossible goal; politics is indeed hidden in the daily practice of the board, which we as an academic world must deal with as consciously as possible. How do you do justice to social engagement and at the same time ensure that the university continues to play its critical, independent scientific role? And: how does humanistic inspiration play a role in this at the UoH?

In-depth

Agonism and Agonistic Dialogue

Political philosopher Chantal Mouffe (2013) argues for a pluralist democracy that recognizes and legitimizes conflict. She distinguishes between antagonism, a struggle between enemies, and agonism, a struggle between opponents. Opponents share the democratic principles of freedom and equality, but take different (political) positions on the issues at stake. Agonistic politics, as expressed by Mouffe (2013, p.14), emphasizes two key concepts: agonism and hegemony. According to Mouffe, agonism is a crucial element of democracy and thus offers an alternative to both consensus and hostile antagonism. Conflicts are inevitable and every society has a diversity of opinions and interests. Rather than eliminating conflicts, agonism offers a way to channel them within a democratic framework. By offering space to different visions, a lively space is created in which new ideas and solutions can emerge. By hegemony, Mouffe refers to the dynamic process in which power relations shift. Hegemony arises when different groups try to make their own view of the world dominant. This happens in ever-changing force fields that are subject to contestation.

Following Mouffe, Suransky and Alma (2017) use the concept of agonistic dialogue as a form of conversation that acknowledges and values the dynamics of conflict and disagreement, while remaining within a framework of respect and mutual understanding. An agonistic dialogue offers space for conflict as a potentially productive force in which it is not about winning a debate, but actively seeking mutual understanding and insight. An agonistic dialogue strengthens democratic culture by offering space for diverse perspectives and thus promoting broad involvement and participation. Agonistic dialogue acknowledges the role of emotions and passions. Sharing deep convictions and emotions can lead to a more authentic conversation.

This requires an open attitude, but can also arise from competition (Matusov & Marjanovic-Shane, 2016). By sparring with a radically different viewpoint, one's own self-evidence can be exposed and sharpened. The desire to surpass the other also contains a desire to learn from the other.

Tool

World Wide Woke: Decolonization in an International Comparative Perspective

Duration:	2 hours of dialogue + reading and writing assignment
Number of participants:	20 – 40
Objective:	To gain in-depth insight into historical and geopolitical contexts through a dialogue between students and staff from educational institutions from different countries.
Language:	English

What: Students (and staff) from educational institutes located in different countries engage in an online dialogue with each other. After a plenary introduction, students meet in pairs or small groups, in breakout rooms with representatives from the other country. The dialogue can be based on priorly formulated questions and/or on texts which need to be read before the online dialogue. To reflect on this learning experience, the participants co-write a blog as pairs/small groups.

Why: Worldwide, wokeness and decolonization are topical, pertinent and controversial topics. What can we learn from each other by discussing how we experience these topics in our daily lives in different contexts? The goal of the dialogue is for all participants to get more insight in how historical and geopolitical context influence how we understand and engage with wokeness and decolonization in society and in higher education. Students expressed that discussing differences and similarities is enlightening: it gives a better understanding of wokeness and decolonization and the significance of social context in which those phenomena develop. What each of us does and does not know and takes for granted, is brought to the fore. It turned out to be an inspiring and engaging way for students to learn from students whom they otherwise might not be in contact with, in ways in which all students are equally responsible to teach and learn.

Context: In our case, as an educational institute in the Global North (the Netherlands), we connected with an educational institute in the Global South (South Africa) with whom our project leader already had ties. The online dialogue could be an extracurricular event for which students sign up voluntarily, or the online dialogue can be embedded in an existent course. We offered the online dialogue as an extracurricular for any interested students (or staff), who signed up via e-mail. After this trial, the project leader decided to embed the online dialogue in the course she teaches.

Preparation

Set up the online dialogue with another educational institute. Design the program: time and date, introduction, questions and/or readings, time management. Make sure that all technical – ICT requirements are functional.

In case of an extracurricular activity, advertise and set a deadline for applications. Keep track of the participants from both educational institutes and make pairs and/or small groups, making sure each pair/small group has peers from both countries.

Send the participants instructions prior to the meeting: the meeting link, what (readings) to prepare and what to expect.

Timetable

15 min	Plenary	Welcome and introduction on the universities and participants; the questions and/or readings; 'Why this dialogue?'
20-30 min	Breakout	Dialogue on questions 1 and 2.
15 min	Plenary	Sharing of findings regarding questions 1 and 2.
20-30 min	Breakout	Dialogue on questions 3 and 4.
15 min	Plenary	Plenary sharing of findings regarding questions 3 and 4. All participants write a summary of their take-aways in the chat.
5-10 min	Plenary	Introduce the writing assignment and share instructions. Thank all participants.

Literature we asked students to read prior to the dialogue:

1. By an Surinamese Dutch author in the Dutch context:
Wekker, G. (2016). The house that race built. In G. Wekker, *White innocence: Paradoxes of colonialism and race* (pp. 50-80). Duke University Press.
2. By a Cameroonian author in the South African context:
Mbembe, A. J. (2016). Decolonizing the university: New directions. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 15(1), 29-45.

The questions that we discussed in rounds:

- How does colonial history appear in your daily life in (country A)/(country B) society?
- How does colonial history appear more specifically in your work/study at (educational institute A)/(educational institute B)?
- How does 'wokeness' play a role at your educational institute? How does it manifest itself, including resistance to wokeness?
- What does "decolonizing higher education" mean to you?

Writing assignment instructions

With your international peer(s), you will co-write a reflective blog for which you will receive a “pass” or “no pass”. Dependent on one’s institutional arrangement, these blogs can be shared in the online environment of a specific course, in broader institutional context or even make it accessible to a broader readership.

The formal requirements of the assignment are:

- Minimum 1.200 and maximum 1.800 words (excluding the bibliography / reference list).
- The blog has a title and lists the co-authors and their educational institutes.
- Minimum of two references, one selected by the (country A) peer(s) and one selected by the (country B) peer(s). Maximum of four references.
- One citation style, applied consistently (MLA, APA, Chicago, IEEE, CSE).
- Submit by (date) (time) by e-mailing it to both teachers (and your peer(s) CC).

In your blog, you should address the following:

- Focus: What did you learn about wokeness/coloniality/decolonization from the dialogue? Describe your main take-away(s) and what you found most striking.
- Focus: Describe how the dialogue made this learning possible.
- Provide some information about your different educational contexts.
- Address your lived experiences: how do you experience your (educational) context, what was it like to engage in this dialogue?
- The references provide depth to your reflections and/or answers to questions raised during the dialogue, but are not the main focus of the blog.

You can write your blog...

1. As one integrated text written by a “we”.

Example sentences:

We found that...

We were surprised by...

When Anna said..., we realized...

By sharing our experiences, we ...

2. And/or

As a dialogue where it is visible that you are responding in writing to each other.

Example sentences:

Anna: What Jessica said about... really changed my view on...

(Elaborate)

Jessica: I did not realize that ... until Anna brought this up.

(Elaborate)

Phase 4

Evaluating and sharing educational change

The final phase was all about taking stock. For some, decolonization seems to be a never-ending process, leading to feelings of 'woke fatigue'. With the horrors in Gaza flaring up, questions about polyphony, power and countervailing power are becoming extra urgent. In this phase, we supported initiatives by staff and students and once again facilitated dialogue in the canteen. Ultimately, we shared our experiences and insights with a wide audience during the closing conference.

Activities

- Three workshops on 'decolonial dialogue' and additional supervision by expert Şeydâ Buurman-Kutsal.
- Dialogue in the canteen about the decolonization of education and the way universities deal with political activism surrounding the war in Gaza. An explanation of the exact implementation can be found in this document on page 8.
- Project evaluation through an online Padlet, focus groups and student thesis research.
- National closing conference for students and staff in higher education and related organizations, where we shared the knowledge we gained at the UoH focused on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion and decolonization of higher education.
- Publication tool kit.



Experiences & returns



Progress and reflection

Evaluations of the project show that progress has been made in the literature offered by UoH education, with more attention for feminist, post - and decolonial thinkers and thinkers from the Global South. This is seen as enriching and deepening of study and discussions in working groups. But there is still much to be done. One student noted: "Although a number of lecturers are theoretically able to teach about institutional racism, their education is still full of micro aggressions."

The workshops and lectures have broadened the concept of 'decolonization' and show what this process can look like in educational contexts. One participant noted: "it requires constant reflection on what we take for granted, what (implicit) rules there are, who has the power to do something about it, and how we experience all of this." The emphasis on rational and cognitive ways of learning often comes at the expense of other ways of learning, such as bodily and emotional practices. One participant felt "seen and strengthened by receiving training from a woman of color," which emphasizes the need for diverse role models in education.

The many dialogues provided space for the shared need to discuss 'challenging topics'. Lecturers were given tools and working methods to facilitate such conversations in their courses and connect with each other in discussions and for inspiration.

Final conference

The conference was attended by approximately one hundred participants from eleven higher education institutions, five non-governmental organizations and representatives of local governments. Prof. Gloria Wekker provided the keynote. She spoke about her experiences first as student and then as professor. As a 'space invader' she analyzed racism in the Netherlands, about which she wrote her well-known book *White Innocence*. In a fascinating argument she emphasized, among other things, the importance of intersectionality in education and research.

The project team, in a session led by Noortje Bot, shared their experiences and results. In the afternoon, participants were able to experience various working methods themselves through interactive workshops: Emotion networking, Socratic and agonistic dialogue, Kaleidoscopia, and an online dialogue with South African students. The conference was concluded by Caroline Suransky, who discussed the concrete findings of the project, but also reflected on the often hard and invisible work that changing an organizational culture requires.

In-depth

Complexity of academic freedom

Academic freedom is crucial for science and higher education. It includes legal protection for scientists to conduct research freely and to teach freely without outside interference. This is supported by legislation such as Article 1.6 of the WHW and Article 13 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. Students also have the right to academic freedom, including free debate, free assembly and absence of indoctrination. Institutional boards must guarantee these freedoms and balance them with order and security. Sigal Ben-Porath (2017) emphasizes that academic freedom is essential for critical thinking, creativity and the search for truth. Universities must provide space for diverse ideas without fear of repercussions and seek a balance between academic freedom and inclusivity. Ben-Porath advocates 'civil discourse'; respectful and constructive dialogue between different points of view, even on controversial topics. Although she is in favor of academic freedom, she recognizes that there must be limits: Where statements lead to direct harm or undermine participation in academic life. Creating an open academic culture is difficult. Confrontations around Black Lives Matter and the war in Israel and Palestine made this clear in our project.

Black Lives Matter re-energized the discussion about decolonization of research and curricula. Some fear a blurring of the boundary between science and politics, while others consider space for different perspectives crucial for good research and education (Stoker et al., 2023). Adekoya et al. (2020) argue that decolonization actually promotes space for different perspectives and is essential for academic freedom. However, the requirement that Eurocentric perspectives be discussed is seen by some as a restriction of the freedom to conduct research as one sees fit.

Pro-Palestine activists demand that universities sever ties with Israeli universities. University boards refuse, invoking academic freedom and neutrality to give space to all perspectives. Activists argue that universities bear responsibility for the social impact of scientific knowledge.

Decolonial thinkers such as Santos (2016) warn of epistemicide through the dominance of Eurocentric knowledge systems, leading to the marginalization of non-European knowledge (Icaza & Vazquez, 2019; Le Grange, 2019). These thinkers emphasize the importance of inclusive and equitable knowledge systems within universities.

Tool

Emotion networking

Duration:	3 hours
Number of participants:	5 - 12 per discussion table
Objective:	To jointly investigate the often emotionally charged relationships between people and cultural heritage.

Emotion networking was developed by the Reinwardt Academy for Cultural Heritage and the Amsterdam heritage institution Imagine IC. The method helps people become 'heritage aware' by investigating the emotional and social dynamics surrounding heritage objects. Consider, for example, the annual discussion about Black Pete in the Netherlands. Such discussions make clear how the past and the present are inextricably linked. A network approach makes visible how different interests and emotions are interwoven. This ensures mutual understanding and new insights into how the past is dealt with in the present.

The method is applied in museums, classrooms and many other contexts, to make controversial issues surrounding a shared past discussable. The method has been used at the University of Humanistic Studies to jointly investigate the colonial past of its building on the Kromme Nieuwegracht in Utrecht.

Caleidoscopia - playing with diversity

Duration:	Various working methods from 30 minutes to 5 hours
Number of participants:	3 to 100
Objective:	Promoting intersectional thinking

Caleidoscopia was developed to explore and promote diversity and inclusion in a playful way. The method uses a card game that helps people reflect on their own and other people's dimensions of diversity, which leads to respectful and open dialogues about diversity and inclusion.

This method can be used widely, for example in educational institutions, healthcare organizations, and for professionals who work with diverse groups. It helps navigate complex interactions and power structures by promoting intersectional thinking.

[You can order the card game and the book with theory and various working methods here.](#)

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Thank you

Questions or additions?
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