

Decolonizing the Curriculum

Humanities 295-02 (2 credits, S/D/F)

Grinnell College

#DeCoGrinnell

Caleb Elfenbein

elfenbei@grinnell.edu

Office: Macy House 210

Office Hours: M 10-11; Th 3-4

This course will introduce you to core concepts and themes on the subject of decolonizing educational institutions and curricula. We will read and discuss work by scholars writing from a diversity of perspectives and locations, consider the implications of different approaches to decolonizing curricula and institutions, and collaborate to develop a practical toolkit for change. Beginning September 12, the course will meet roughly every other week Thursdays from 9-10:50 a.m. with additional off-week student-only meetings.

All of our work this semester will unfold on the ancestral territory of the Meskwaki, Sauk, and Iowa peoples, whose land was taken from them through the encroachment of white settlers and then formally in 1845 through government land concessions that were part of an official government policy known as Indian removal. Today, members of the Meskwaki nation continue to live, work, and raise families on the Meskwaki Settlement in Tama County, Iowa, less than 30 miles from Grinnell College.

Course Texts

Most course readings are available electronically through Burling Library. Others are available on the course site or online. Whenever possible I provide a link on the syllabus for maximum accessibility.

Course Requirements

As a two-credit offering, we will meet less frequently than other full-semester courses. This makes attendance especially important. The nature of our work together, which will emphasize collective learning and scholarship, will very much depend on a common and consistent commitment to the course.

Throughout the semester you will be responsible for keeping a weekly journal. Each entry should be approximately 250-300 words. Your entries will serve as a record of your reflections on course readings, class meetings, and “toolkit” production.

The course’s final project will be a cumulative and collective effort to create a toolkit for curricular change. My hope is that we can create something that can serve as a resource for collaborative work across our campus as we engage in the ongoing work of

cultivating an accessible and equitable community of living and learning. Each student will also be responsible for identifying one campus educator with whom to engage in dialogue about decolonizing the curriculum and learning spaces.

Course Expectations and Goals

Decolonizing the Curriculum, as a course and a goal, is in every sense a collective, collaborative effort. We will read together, discuss together, create together. If we approach this work with a spirit of generosity we will also have many opportunities to grow together. Practicing a spirit of generosity is the **foundational expectation** of our course. I use the word practice very intentionally.

In *Generous Thinking*, Kathleen Fitzpatrick writes, “Practices are not about perfection but about a continual, impossible attempt to perfect. They are ways of being in the world.” (68) She suggests that a key element of generosity as practice is critical humility, which requires that in order to truly listen to each other “we must not only refrain from assuming that everyone else is in the wrong, but we also must remain open to the real possibility that *we might be*.” (40) Fitzpatrick follows this with a simple, though very difficult, formula for generous thinking: Assume positive intent; own negative effects. This is generous thinking as a practice, a habit of mind.

We will all have missteps in our work together. Assume positive intent. Own negative effects. We will—we should—disagree with readings and with each other. Assume positive intent. Own negative effects. This is generous thinking as practice.

Fitzpatrick imagines generous thinking as a fundamentally dialogic practice. Being in dialogue requires that we develop a shared vocabulary. “The kind of inquiry that scholars and other writers undertake relies on the possibility of a shared vocabulary, which creates the conditions under which we might conduct a conversation about complex and often contentious ideas, in the hope that we might come to some kind of mutual understanding.” (47) Like generous thinking itself, developing a shared vocabulary is an ongoing process, particularly as more and more members of our communities enter into conversation.

We have two central goals in this course. The **first goal** is to use our readings to develop a shared vocabulary about what it means to decolonize a curriculum and learning spaces. Developing this shared vocabulary is a necessary step toward the **second goal** of the course, which is to create a resource—a toolkit, to borrow Sarah Ahmed’s term—to share with others at Grinnell with whom we want to be in dialogue. Sharing this kind of resource can be a first step in developing a shared vocabulary with others.

To help accomplish these goals and remain within the parameters of a collaborative two-credit course, we will

- Meet every other week collectively. On weeks we aren’t all meeting together as a class, there will be one-hour student-only gatherings. We will work together to

establish the parameters of these meetings, which will function as opportunities to reflect and continue work on toolkit creation.

- Be accountable to one another. If accountability is breaking down I encourage you to respectfully advocate for yourself (and with others). My door is open to you to discuss any aspect of our work together. (I typically respond to email within 24 hours.)

Course Policies

I've decided to grade the course according to an S/D/F scale in order to emphasize the collective and collaborative nature of the course. This course is not preparing you for an individual goal. It's preparing you to be a contributor to campus dialogue. Of course, I still do need to evaluate your contributions. I will be grading you on the basis of your preparation for class, your engagement with our ongoing discussions, your journal entries, and your contribution to the final toolkit.

If there is something happening in the classroom—or any learning space associated with the class—that is getting in the way of your ability to get the most out of this learning experience, please don't stay silent. You can talk to me if you're comfortable. If you'd rather speak with someone else, I recommend Chinyere Ukabiala, the College's Ombudsperson. If *I'm* doing something that is preventing you from getting the most out of this learning experience, please speak with the Ombudsperson and she will help you figure out next steps.

Having a fully inclusive classroom (and course in general) is very important to me. I welcome individual students to talk to me about learning needs. In particular, I encourage students with disabilities to let me know how our classroom or course activities could impact the disability and what accommodations would be essential to you. You will also need to have a conversation about and provide documentation of your disability to the Coordinator for Student Disability Resources, John Hirschman, located on the 3rd floor of Goodnow Hall (x3089).

Given the nature of our course, any more than one unexcused absence from our collective meetings will result in an automatic D. Please communicate with me in advance of an absence when your life requires you to miss our time together.

Weekly P-Web journal entries are due by Sunday at 9 p.m.

Class Schedule

September 12: Introductions

- Reflections: Why are you here? What is the problem you are seeing?
- (Collective) Readings
 - Boroughs, "[Why South African Students Say The Statue of Rhodes Must Fall](#)"
 - Prinsloo, "[The Role of the Humanities in Decolonizing the Academy](#)"

September 26: Rhodes Must Fall

- Reading
 - Gebrial, “Rhodes Must Fall: Oxford and Movements for Change”

October 10: Being Unsettled

- Reading
 - Tuck and Yang, “[Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor](#)”

October 31: Directions

- Reading
 - Mbembe, “[Decolonizing the University](#)”

November 14: Toolkits for Chip, Chip, Chipping

- Reading
 - Sarah Ahmed, “[Resignation](#),” “[Resignation Is a Feminist Issue](#),” and “[Feminism and Fragility](#),” all from her blog, *Feminist Killjoy*

December 5: Our Curriculums and Classrooms

- Reading
 - #decolonizingyoursyllabus:<https://twitter.com/MaxLiboiron/status/1160131991498567682>
 - O’Sullivan, “[Decolonizing the Classroom](#)”
 - Connell, “[Decolonizing Sociology](#)”
 - Zinga and Styres, “[Decolonizing Curriculum: Student Resistances to Anti-Oppressive Pedagogy](#)”

December 12: Preparing Our Toolkit For Change

- Reading
 - Research, select, and read one scholarly resource that relates to decolonizing a syllabus or curriculum in your major/field.