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Article

Collaboration and Decolonisation: Revising a Course on Globalisation and Sustainable Development

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Abstract

This article explores collaboration between educators with complementary yet distinct relationships to racial capitalism and its role in pedagogical disruption of Nordic exceptionalism in sustainability education. The discussion is specifically situated within Norwegian higher education, where denaturalising 'imagined sameness' (likhet) requires tailored pedagogical strategies. Through counter-storytelling and collaborative autoethnographic reflection on our 'tinkerings' with the curricula of the jointly taught course 'Globalisation and sustainable development', we tell a story of our pedagogical strategies and the affective labour needed in sustained decolonial collaboration within predominantly white institutional spaces. Our reflection indicates that strategic collaboration has the potential to strengthen resistance to systems of oppression. Secondly, incremental 'tinkering' may be more effective in the long-term than a dramatic curricular overhaul. And finally, context matters. Decolonisation of education must be a pluriversal effort – specific to the situatedness of the educational environment.

Keywords: counter-storytelling, decolonising education, Nordic exceptionalism, pluriverse, collaboration

Introduction

Anticolonialism. Anti-racism. Anti-capitalism. Pluriverse thinking. As critical scholars, we can discuss the finer points of nuance while supporting each other in resisting hegemonic Western narratives. Yet there are issues to consider in educational encounters with our students, as well as negotiations in the day-to-day navigation of our educational institutions' rules, norms, and their socio-culturally dependent discursive policies. Thus, practically, there can be myriad challenges to collaboratively decolonising our pedagogical practices.

In this paper, we offer autoethnographic reflections and tell the (counter)story of our own teaching practice, with particular focus on the challenges and negotiations involved in teaching sustainable development in Norwegian universities. We highlight the role of collaboration and supporting each other in pushing the envelope as we work toward decolonising our teaching practice. Our research question centres collaborative decolonial pedagogy in the Nordics, specifically: How can collaboration between educators with complementary yet distinct relationships to racial capitalism contribute to disrupting Nordic exceptionalism in sustainability education? And further, what pedagogical strategies emerge when educators attempt to denaturalise 'imagined sameness' (likhet), or open for alternate stories, in Norwegian higher education? This inquiry centres both pedagogical strategies and the affective labour involved in sustained decolonial collaboration within predominantly white institutional spaces.

Coloniality and the Nordics

The Nordic context presents unique challenges for addressing racial capital. Most of the Nordic countries rank high on the Human Development Index (HDI) and maintain a particular flavour of welfare and equality (Porte & Larsen, 2023) that creates an especially well-rehearsed surface veneer of goodness (Ursin & Lysså, 2024). Critical scholars in the Nordics have coined the term ‘Nordic exceptionalism’ to highlight not only the virtuous self-image (Loftsdottír & Jensen, 2016; Vesterdal, 2019) of these nations, but also the deliberate amnesia regarding Nordic involvement in colonial projects (Conolly et al., 2025; Eriksen et al., 2024).

Recent years have seen an increase in research and efforts towards decolonising within higher education in the Nordics. Relevant special issues include ‘Decolonial Options in Education’ (Eriksen & Svendsen, 2020), ‘Education and Coloniality in the Nordics’ (Eriksen et al., 2024) and ‘Power and majority discourses in education - critical perspectives’ (Bergersen & Sønsthagen, 2025). While not the only research on decolonisation efforts in the Nordics (cf. Infanti et al., 2025), the articles in these special issues highlight pertinent educational concerns: for example, the challenges of decolonising courses when one’s positionality and knowledge frameworks are embedded within colonised educational contexts (Olsson et al., 2024). Conolly and colleagues (2025) problematise the Nordic understanding of imagined sameness,

arguing that decolonising is difficult so long as the discomfort of difference is considered unacceptable. Salinas (2020) and Abamosa (2024) offer autoethnographic reflections on Nordic adult education, highlighting the dehumanisation and devaluing of *other* knowledges, with Abamosa specifically tackling the expectation of gratitude towards Nordic 'generosity'.

Recurring themes relevant within these discussions include imagined sameness (likhet), such as identified by Gullestad (2002) – the idea that cultural homogeneity is a prerequisite for Nordic egalitarianism – and Nordic success discourses which foreground narratives of colonial innocence. These are not unidimensional issues, but complex ideologies which permeate Nordic norms and thus also shape our students' preconceptions. Concepts from decolonial scholars help to illuminate the nuances of these Nordic preconceptions as well as ideologies or epistemologies which may challenge such thinking. Some of these include racial capital (Jenkins & Leroy, 2021), colonial matrix of power (Mignolo, 2011, p. xv), abyssal thinking and epistemicide (Santos, 2016), and epistemic freedom (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018).

Racial capital challenges the idea that racial oppression is only one deleterious part of the capitalist system (Jenkins & Leroy, 2021). Rather, the current capitalist system was built on wealth extracted through the oppression of racialised peoples and, as a cornerstone, continues to this day. Such knowledge is difficult for society at large to recognise. However, this is even more difficult when an ideology, such as Nordic exceptionalism, permeates a society and wilful amnesia has completely or partially overwritten colonial legacies, such as participation in the slave trade (Bertelsen, 2015; Conolly et al., 2025), and atrocities, such as Norwegianisation (fornorskning) of the Saami and other indigenous minorities (Eriksen, 2018). As the example of Farouk al-Kasim, described later, highlights, racial capital extracts labour and knowledge while erasing racialised peoples' central role in, for example, the Norwegian success story (Fylkesnes et al., 2025).

Regarding the colonial matrix of power, Mignolo (2011) highlights four interconnected domains, namely: knowledge and subjectivity, economy, authority, and racism, gender, and sexuality (2011, p. 9). These inform colonially mandated definitions of modernity and Norway's allegiance to the matrix of power can be seen in its branding as human rights champion and efforts to garner soft power within the colonial capitalistic order (Vesterdal, 2019). Knowledge authority or definitional power can also be seen in what Gullestad (2002) identified as imagined sameness (likhet). – A discourse agreeable to the power matrix.

The homogeneity pervading imagined sameness (likhet) discourses can also be analysed through the lens of abyssal thinking (Santos, 2016). While modern science draws lines of distinction between recognised and non-recognised knowledge, the Nordic ideology of imagined sameness (likhet) deepens and widens the abyssal divide to where even basic human heterogeneity becomes unfathomable – including the difference of the 'white' indigenous people of the north. Essentially this leads to epistemicide (Santos, 2016). Post-

WW2 Norwegian nation-building efforts replicated the erasure tactics of other Western countries, attempting to build a homogenous nation. They followed in the footsteps of the colonial schools model, systematically ignoring and erasing existing knowledge systems (Freire, 2000; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018), the Other within, with an ongoing obfuscation of unfavourable histories, such as the Norwegianification (fornorskning) of the Saami indigenous people and erasure of their language and culture (Eriksen, 2018; Eriksen et al., 2024). Meanwhile, the egalitarian Nordic model, the 'success' story, is the one propagated.

However, different stories must be told and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018, p. 4) calls for epistemic freedom as distinguished from academic freedom and cognitive justice. Epistemic freedom is not about the autonomy of academic institutions (academic freedom) or even about recognising different forms of knowing or sense-making (cognitive justice). Rather, it is about recognising knowledges as *plural*. Further, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018, p. 33) argues that epistemic freedom is a prerequisite for economic, cultural, and political freedom. In other words, without epistemic freedom, decolonisation is not possible – no other story can be told, no independent nation can be built, and no other ways of living can be recognised or even imagined.

In his book *Epistemic Freedom in Africa*, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) explores the context within which African scholars struggle for epistemic freedom, painting a picture of the harm caused by colonialism's epistemicide (Santos, 2016). He states: "No wonder that African intellectual interventions have often sounded deeply polemical, if not aggressive" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018, p. 15), highlighting the affective dimension of the struggle (Ahmed, 2014). What this means is that epistemic oppression, epistemicide, the erasure of other stories, the gaslighting, the weaponised objectivity (Gobena et al., 2025) all contribute to an affective emotional burden born by the Other, the strange one, the person whose story does not conform – whose legitimacy is always in question (Nyamnjoh, 2012).

The abolitionist university, Zembylas (2021) argues, requires explicit strategies, one of which is the need for awareness of the dual affects in operation: In addition to recognising the affective worlds of the marginalised, we must recognise the existence of white affects which work to maintain Western hegemony. In other words, epistemic freedom is an affective struggle all around. To further address the emotional burden, Méndez' (2023) discussion of *acuerpar* bears mentioning. Grounded in decolonial feminist ethics of care, she contrasts what she calls 'empathy tourism' with her experience of *acuerpar* or embodied solidarity in a collective in Honduras. She argues "*acuerpar* pushes radical social movements to recognize care as central to struggles against systemic inequality" (Méndez, 2023, p. 57). Such forms of embodied solidarity acknowledge the affective dimensions of the challenge and the need for what could be called decolonial care networks.

As such, we recognise that we are in it for the long haul, so to speak, and working towards an abolitionist

university (Zembylas, 2021), or what could also be called a decolonial utopia (Murphy, 2024), requires both recognition of what we are up against as well as what options are available. Murphy (2024) explores Agamben's notion of weak utopia, arguing that within the confines of our range of possibility, our aim is not to establish a new system, a new utopia. Rather it is to keep trying, keep exploring, keep learning, keep working toward incremental change. Murphy (2024) builds his argument, describing the insecurity many scholars face within their institutions, including short-term contracts, regulatory and policy constrains. In the context of university pedagogy, he borrows and adapts the term 'tinkering' to describe the tweaking, the tailoring, the adaptation which we can do to improve our courses and foster critical thinking in our students. This type of tailored experimentation in our courses is what we can do *now*, within our present (limited) context. He argues "tinkering towards utopia is a slow burn" (Murphy, 2024, p. 70). In a similar vein, Zembylas (2021) reminds us that abolition is an ongoing process, a continual present praxis, a creative process or project.

Thus, we follow in the footsteps of other decolonial scholars in the "studied disruption of everydayness" (Quayson, 2000, p. 34), challenging taken for granted discourses of Western superiority and promoting epistemic justice. Specifically, in knowledge co-production, collaborative partnerships "must also grapple with epistemic legitimacy, cultural translation, and differentiated access to power" (Doumbia et al., 2025, p. 3). As the African Charter on Transformative Research Collaborations highlights, power-imbalances in global knowledge production are multi-layered and become especially visible in negotiations of epistemologies; language; theories and concepts; the developmentalist framing; institutional resourcing; and practical arrangements (PARC & HUMA, 2023, pp. 6, 8–10). The pluriverse, as conceptualised by Escobar (2018) and operationalised by Kothari et al. (2019), contributes to offering alternatives to monolithic worldviews by acknowledging multiple, co-existing worlds, knowledges, and ways of knowing. Moreover, it is essential to recognise that intellectual epistemic tolerance is insufficient. Power must be addressed.

In conclusion, challenging Nordic exceptionalism requires fundamental epistemological shifts that acknowledge the ongoing violence of Western educational systems while at the same time actively 'tinkering' (Murphy, 2024) and creating space(s) for pluriversal alternatives to emerge through collaborative caring praxis.

Sustainable Development Discourses

Building on this foundation, we now turn to examine how these dynamics play out specifically within sustainability discourse and educational practice. An important part of the popularity of sustainability discourse lies in its versatility and malleability. Sustainable development, sustainable growth, sustainable business models, social sustainability iterations and interpretations of sustainability discourses abound

(Farley & Smith, 2020). In Addo, Koers, and Timpson's (2022, p. 1478) discussion of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and social development, they highlight their field's "integration of multiple interventions to promote holistic development." Yet such florid discourse and good intentions tend to mask underlying assumptions and historical legacies.

Discussions on teaching development studies have problematised various dimensions of the field. For example, Ito (2017) argues that development studies programmes in Japan should be more cognisant of their own situatedness in competing East-West discourses of development. Kilby (2018) argues from the Australian context that critiques of aid effectiveness, neo-liberalism, and neo-colonialism overlook Southern-led and South-South cooperation entirely. Harcourt (2017) shares her experiences using a post-development perspective in a course with a large percentage of international global south students in a Dutch educational institution.

Two book anthologies explore development studies, starting from the backdrop of standardisation and accreditation debates in Europe (Baud et al., 2019). Some discussion focuses on the "dominance of knowledge from Northern (or Western) academics and the 'othering' of knowledge from developing country regions" (Basile & Baud, 2019, p. 13), highlighting definitional power imbalances. The follow-up volume (Melber et al., 2024) further problematises the field, with explicit focus on "how knowledge is produced, validated, and disseminated" (Biekart et al., 2024, p. 3).

Returning to the Africa Charter for Transformative Research Collaborations (PARC & HUMA, 2023), development discourse is exposed. In addition to the other layers of power imbalances (epistemologies, languages, theories, concepts, etc.), the Charter specifically problematises the framing or ‘gaze’ of development – as something Africa needs to do and which the West can or should help with. This ignores the centrality of Western exploitation in propagating and maintaining an unsustainable system – capitalist consumerism. Thus, sustainable development discourse must be interrogated, including, for example, the uncritical adoption of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) frameworks. What is to be ‘sustained’? What exactly are we or societies ‘developing’ into? To answer such questions, non-Western knowledge, such as African philosophies, which predate and transcend Western sustainability discourse, are desperately needed. The Ubuntu paradigm (Assié-Lumumba, 2017), for example, articulates a relational ontology that reconceptualises human-environment relationships beyond the nature/culture binary that characterizes Western sustainability approaches. Such perspectives propose instead that human flourishing emerges through interconnection with people, nature, ancestors, and future generations. But these perspectives and knowledge regimes are often stifled.

In the Norwegian context, within teacher education, sustainable development constitutes one of three

interdisciplinary themes that should be integrated into all primary and secondary curricular subjects (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017). Within our university's current bachelor programme, Social Sustainability, we teach the course 'Globalisation and Sustainable Development'. Thus, sustainability and sustainable development narratives are prevalent in public and political debate and policy, as well as central to teaching and educational aims. Such institutional contexts shape both the possibilities and constraints we face as educators seeking to introduce decolonial perspectives within existing curricular frameworks.

Counter-Storytelling

Understanding how we, as educators, navigate educational institutional dynamics requires attention to our positioning (Yip, 2023) within systems of racial capitalism and Nordic exceptionalism. We ground our positionality-sensitive autoethnographic methodology within counter-storytelling which Solórzano and Yosso (2001) situate in a critical tradition, specifically Critical Race Theory (CRT) and LatCrit. They highlight "four theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical functions" of counter stories:

> (1) they can build community among those at the margins of society by putting a human and familiar face to educational theory and practice; (2) they can challenge the perceived wisdom of those at society's center by providing a context to understand and transform established belief systems; (3) they can open new windows into the reality of those at the margins of society by showing the possibilities beyond the ones they live and demonstrating that they are not alone in their position; and (4) they can teach others that by combining elements from both the story and the current reality, one can construct another world that is richer than either the story or the reality alone (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001, p. 475).

This methodology aligns with our aim of exploring ways to tell (multiple) alternative stories through collaborative decolonial pedagogy within the Nordics. Through this un-formal reflexive discussion, we tell a (counter)story of teaching that we believe our fellow colleagues on the margins will see themselves in (1). It is a story that poses questions and challenges the Nordic exceptionalist belief system (2). Furthermore, in telling the story of our as-yet-not-proven-fully-successful course iteration, we open an opportunity to explore (alternative) possibilities in teaching (3). The element of our current reality is there in the section describing our teaching intervention, but it also contains a wish and a hope to reach our students and help them move beyond the single story to the pluriverse (4).

We begin with our situated (counter)stories.

Dansholm:

> I have Scandinavian parents but grew up and spent over two decades of my (earlier) adulthood in non-white majority countries. From childhood, I was thus accustomed to recognising people of colour as authority figures and more knowledgeable than me. This, among other things, resulted in a considerable adjustment period when moving to Norway to understand the local ways of thinking; and, along with many immigrants, I experienced the de-legitimisation of all foreign work experience and knowledge, except as curiosity. I was

supposedly coming home, and yet I quickly realised that I identified with and felt more belonging among people of colour, particularly immigrants, than with 'my people' – the Nordic white majority. This feeling of a stronger identification with the Other carried over into my academic experience and teaching.

I have an interdisciplinary social science background, with development studies central to my qualifications. I have work experience in development management, providing me with both academic and experiential understanding of the field. In Norway, I have taught courses in environment and sustainable development in teacher education, globalisation and intercultural relations, and politics and the welfare state.

Before Zeleke and I became colleagues, I gained some awareness of the influence of Nordic exceptionalism and attempted to include critical perspectives in my teaching to resist the colonial context-lessness of Nordic development-related education. However, meeting Zeleke and building a collaborative relationship has provided much more than mere collegial support. While my life experience as a white woman working abroad offered me a degree of insight into racial capitalism, Zeleke's many years of experience navigating racial capitalism's legacy within Nordic white working spaces brought my learning and nuance to a new level. Racial and colonial-legacy issues that I was aware of through marginalising experiences and theory were set in stark relief in dialogue with Zeleke – through both his theoretical / intellectual / scientific knowledge and lived experience.

Zeleke:

I am an African immigrant who has lived in Norway for most of my life. I work in Norwegian higher education as a scholar and do not fully fit into the imagined centre. On some occasions, my background and history shape how students and colleagues see me and react, often before they listen to what I say. Sometimes my presence is used as evidence that the Norwegian society is already fair and inclusive. On other occasions my competence is questioned in subtle ways. I experience being visible but not always recognised as authoritative.

Due to my positionality, tokenism has shaped many of my experiences in Norwegian higher education and working life in Norway more generally. At times, I have been treated as a symbol rather than a scholar, invited into spaces to show diversity instead of shaping knowledge. My presence can be used to signal openness, while my critical perspectives remain uncomfortable or ignored. This can create quiet tension. I am visible, but only within narrow limits. Tokenism also works through praise. I may be described as inspiring, resilient, or important for representation, while my academic arguments receive less engagement. In such moments, recognition replaces listening. Institutions appear progressive, but the structures of authority remain unchanged. Speaking too critically risks being seen as ungrateful or disruptive, which increases the affective burden I bear. This dynamic is exhausting because it demands constant self-monitoring. I must decide when to speak, how strongly, and at what cost. Naming tokenism becomes part of resisting, even when doing so threatens comfort and belonging. I am present, visible, and often noticed, yet my knowledge and efforts are not fully recognised. I am seen as difference, as diversity, as representation, but not always as a legitimate producer of theory or knowledge. This is what it means to be blinded by sight (Nyamnjoh, 2012). Institutions believe they see me, but this very act of seeing limits what it allows me to be. I am allowed to speak, but only in ways that do not disturb dominant knowledge systems. My presence becomes acceptable as long as it confirms existing frameworks rather than challenging them.

This can also manifest as conditional belonging in my daily work. I am included, but carefully. My visibility reassures institutions, while my critique unsettles them. In this way, my experiences reflect Nyamnjoh's (2012) argument that recognition without epistemic freedom is another form of exclusion.

Teaching globalisation and sustainable development makes these tensions very clear. Sustainability discourse often focuses on solutions while avoiding historical challenges, but I insist on reconnecting development to exploitation, colonialism, cheap labour, and erasure. I do this carefully, knowing that strong resistance can reduce the quality of teaching and learning. My work requires being sensitive to racial positionality and involves emotional effort that often remains invisible. I believe small pedagogical adjustments matter. Even slow change can open space for more honest conversations and different futures. I carry a deep commitment to teaching as a moral and intellectual responsibility. I see the classroom as a place where uncomfortable knowledge must be handled with care – but not avoided. My goal is not to make students feel 'accused', but to invite them to think differently about what they have been taught to take for granted. When students begin to

question familiar stories of progress and innocence, something opens. These moments remind me why I stay, even when the work is heavy and often lonely.

Through this experience, I have learned how collaboration redistributes the epistemic burden, how positionality shapes authority in the classroom and how careful pedagogical work can slowly unsettle Nordic exceptionalism while sustaining critical teaching practice over time.

Thus, my teaching in the classroom and within institutions is shaped by racial capitalism, even when this reality is denied. *Other* knowledge is often welcomed only when it feels neutral or inspirational. When I introduce critical perspectives on colonial history or racism in Norway, some students react defensively. They interpret my arguments as personal or emotional, rather than scholarly knowledge. I must explain to the student thoroughly, justify more, and prove more, simply to be taken seriously.

Collaboration has therefore become essential for me. Working closely with Dansholm creates a space of shared responsibility and support. Together, we challenge Nordic exceptionalism by exposing how equality narratives depend on silence about colonial entanglements. When I speak alone, students may dismiss my critique as bias. When the same critique comes from both of us, it becomes harder to ignore. The work does not become easier, but it becomes more sustainable.

Searching for a key

Together, we have had shared responsibility for several courses since 2023. In addition to the course discussed here, we have collaboratively taught on the topic of children, families, and upbringing in a diversity perspective at both bachelor and master level.

While teaching, we have both experienced reactions from our students that demonstrate abyssal thinking in practice. For example, when Zeleke facilitated a discussion on racism in Norwegian society, presenting statistical data on employment discrimination and housing market bias, one student responded by pointing to Zeleke's position as a university lecturer as evidence that ‘Norway has clearly solved these problems’. This response exemplifies how Nordic exceptionalism operates using token representation to deny systemic racism while simultaneously othering the very person being tokenised. The student's logic rendered Zeleke's lived experience of racism invisible while claiming his professional success as proof of Nordic equality (Gobena et al., 2025).

Another recurring pattern emerges in group discussions and presentations addressing global challenges. When examining case studies of economic inequality or environmental degradation, Norwegian students consistently identify corruption as the primary explanation for global south countries' struggles – without mentioning colonial extraction, debt relationships, or current trade policies that benefit Norway. In one particularly revealing example, a student group examining Nigeria's economic challenges spent fifteen minutes detailing governmental corruption while completely omitting the repercussions of a century of oil extraction by Western companies, including Equinor (formerly Statoil), or Nigeria's colonial history under British rule. These examples demonstrate how abyssal thinking renders certain knowledge invisible while amplifying others, allowing Norwegian students to maintain moral superiority without examining their own country's complicity in global inequalities. For us, the central challenge is how the lens of Nordic

exceptionalism and the single (Eurocentric) story frames students' understanding of the world. How do we as teachers break past that? How do we help our *students* get past that? How do we help them broaden their horizons to be both critical and hopeful? What are the ways we can bring in those *other* stories? It is important to highlight that we do not have *the* answer. This paper does not present a formal evaluation of either the course or our students, but rather ongoing "reflexivity as a process" (Nyamnjoh, 2012, p. 66).

Our practical collaborative process involved regular reflective conversations, during which we analysed our pedagogical experiments, institutional negotiations, and our own learning processes. Our ongoing dialogue centred both planned interventions and unexpected moments of resistance or breakthrough in our practice. These informal reflective dialogues became the foundation for our collaborative analysis, allowing us to deliberate on patterns in our pedagogical development and institutional engagement. We focus on our own learning and growth as educators, aligning our approach with what Santos (2016) calls 'ecology of knowledges', recognising our lacks or ignorance and that our collaborative reflection generates insights about decolonial pedagogy that neither of us could develop individually (Doumbia et al., 2025). This collaboration centres relational epistemologies and solidarity and challenges the individualistic academic authorship that often characterises traditional research approaches (Nyamnjoh, 2012). In the following section, we share reflections on one case of pedagogical 'tinkering' to improve our course(s) (Murphy, 2024).

Reflections on Teaching 'Globalisation and Sustainable Development'

The course forms part of the revised bachelor programme, 'Social Sustainability', which offers two specialisations: value-based leadership and intercultural relations. The programme is mainly taught online, with physical gatherings once per semester in each course (with exceptions). The course was part of the previous iteration of the bachelor programme and has been taught for several years. We began collaboratively teaching the course in 2024 and taught it together for a second time in spring 2025.

In autumn 2024, we participated in the revision of the bachelor programme, which gave us an opportunity to sit together with our colleagues and reflect further on the aims of the programme and our personal ambition as educators to impart critical perspectives to our students. We have also participated in other academic projects where epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007), Eurocentric knowledge, and voice have been topics of discussion and reflection.

In revising the course, our specific student demographic required consideration. Our bachelor programme is taught in Norwegian and many of our students are older: people returning to school, searching for flexible study programmes, and ways to (re)qualify while working – often full-time. As a Norwegian study programme, approximately 99% of our students are Norwegian residents and 100% speak a Scandinavian

language. This means that social norms and preconceived expectations differ from those in an English-language international classroom, such as that described by Harcourt (2017).

Our students have been socialised in the Nordic way of thinking either from birth or through processes of integration. As research within the Nordics shows, the reality of integration usually involves expectations of assimilation, with racialised caveats regarding social mobility (Abamosa, 2024). Thus, preconceptions connected to Nordic exceptionalism (Eriksen et al., 2024) are strong. In pedagogically 'tinkering' (Murphy, 2024) with our courses, we thus frequently reflect on the dual objective of challenging Eurocentric global north hegemonic understanding of the issues more generally, as well as problematising the self-narrative of Norway as human rights champion (Vesterdal, 2019) and exempt from colonial culpability (Eriksen et al., 2024).

When preparing to teach the course for a second time, we examined our curriculum, particularly text authors. We observed a predominance of Nordic Eurocentric textbooks. Some such textbooks can be helpful for our bachelor-level students for two reasons: (1) most prefer Norwegian-language curricula, and (2) such textbooks provide accessible introductions to various concepts within the field of development. However, for critical perspectives, we needed to be more creative and challenge them to move out of their comfort zones as many of the Nordic language textbooks on the topic are framed within Eurocentric epistemologies. We therefore added more English language academic literature which offered diversity in terms of authorship and critical perspectives.

Specifically, we integrated into the curriculum the book *Pluriverse: A post-development dictionary* (Kothari et al., 2019), which has three sections. For this book, we created a study guide to help them understand how to approach reading the first two sections of the book ('Development and its Crises: Global Experiences' and 'Universalizing the Earth: Reformist Solutions'), making note of important concepts to focus on. For the third section of the book, 'A People's Pluriverse: Transformative Initiatives', we assigned groups to choose one chapter for presentation while explicitly reflecting on how the critical concepts from sections one and two applied to their chosen case study. For our semester's physical gathering, we designed a workshop around three articles from the special issue: *Alternatives to Sustainable Development: What Can We Learn from the Pluriverse in Practice?* (Kaul et al., 2022). We chose three strategically different contexts: decolonisation of money (Cabaña & Linares, 2022), solidarity throughout the coffee supply chain (Naylor, 2022), and development alternatives in Tanzania, Iran, and Haiti (Schöneberg et al., 2022). These articles were a bit more challenging for our students due to the academic language but nevertheless they provided interesting case studies in our further exploration of diverse local approaches to development challenges.

In the course, we wanted to highlight critical perspectives while also encouraging students to go beyond in-depth knowledge of development failures and problematic consequences of racial hierarchies. The book (Kothari et al., 2019) and the special issue (Kaul et al., 2022) addressed this need by both critiquing the status quo as well as highlighting alternatives and the pluriverse of approaches to addressing challenges. Again, challenging ideas of linearity and homogeneity is particularly important in the local context due to the prevalence of uniformity thinking within Norwegian society (Ursin & Lysså, 2024). As Gullestad (2002) pointed out, 'imagined sameness' (likhet) is problematically understood as a prerequisite for Nordic egalitarianism. Thus, opening to other ways of doing things and understanding the world was vital.

In the spring 2025 iteration of the course, we designed our first lecture to ground students' understanding of the historical legacies that played a role in the evolution of the term ‘development’ by highlighting various historical dates. For example, we discussed Truman's use of the term in 1949 (Sachs, 2019) and the continued colonial occupation of virtually all African countries until the 1960s and 1970s. Further, historical events were contextualised to help disabuse students of the perception of colonialism as ancient history. For example, the heyday of the American/Russian space programmes was 1950s-1970s; the Vietnam War ended before Zimbabwe gained independence. We also asked students to share their parents' birth dates to provide generational perspective and emphasise our relative proximity to so-called issues of the past. We utilised clips from Raoul Peck's illuminating documentary "Exterminate All the Brutes" to highlight the racist ideologies that ground global north understandings of progress. Through this initial lecture, we aimed to set the stage for critical discussion of how the concept of development was born out of racial supremacist ideologies.

A course assignment that helped highlight the racism at play within the Norwegian context was a quiz on Farouk al-Kasim. An Iraqi oil engineer who came to Norway in the 1960s, he is an unsung national hero whose contribution to Norwegian development is relatively unknown (Fylkesnes et al., 2025). While he received a Norwegian Knight, First Class, of the Order of St. Olav in 2012 in acknowledgement of his contribution to the nation, very few people outside of the oil industry know of his central role in Norway's oil success story and the creation of the national oil fund, through which Norway was effectively protected from Dutch disease.

Learning about Farouk al-Kasim's central role in Norway's successful development is eye-opening for students, who expressed surprise that they have never heard of him considering his national contribution. This serves as a poignant example of racial bias, erasure, and epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007), demonstrating that Norway is not exempt from a whitewashing of history. These pedagogical interventions throughout the semester laid the groundwork for our final assessment, which sought to integrate critical analysis with creative reimagining of development approaches.

While we have not conducted formal analysis of student learning, our collegial discussion of the exam provided us with some thoughts for reflection. The final exam was a digital group oral exam, where groups choose a country to analyse and discuss. In their discussion, the assignment was to demonstrate understanding of the influences of (colonial) history, politics and conflict, geography and resources, as well as population and im/emigration. Further, they should critically explore the discourses and consequences of specific global north/international financial institutions' development interventions (with conditionalities) in the country of their choice and finally present a potential locally relevant pluriversal alternative.

In the spring of 2025, five groups took the exam. Because of the challenges of digital group work (with students spread around the country), the grading was pass/fail. However, we provided students with short verbal feedback on their presentations and responses to our questions, indicating to them what type of grade they might have received if the exam was graded. Some groups fulfilled the bare minimum, while others presented very insightful and critical presentations, reflecting critically on the exploitation of various global south countries and the detrimental impact of, for example, structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) as well as the political sabotage conducted by global north countries over the last few decades.

What was less visible in the group presentations was reflection on racialist legacies, perhaps due to time constraints. However, many students had interesting reflections on, for example, food and resource sovereignty. As is often the case, those student groups who had invested time in following the (voluntary) digital lectures had better results. It quickly became clear in the presentations who had followed the course closely, the lectures, and (English) literature, and thus presented more critical reflections in their group exam presentations. In contrast, some groups seemed to rely heavily on the Norwegian-language course textbook, with its less critical global north narrative of technocratic development solutions and utopian approach to SDG solutions.

This tentative reflective exploration of the 2025 spring semester iteration of the course indicates that our ‘tinkering’ contributed to more critical reflection in many of our student groups, but not all, and we have experienced some challenges due to the digital limitations of the course (recognising that challenges of digital teaching / courses is a whole topic in itself). However, this run of the course has proved to be a fruitful reflexive process, allowing us a first step in collaboratively ‘tinker’ with the course as a pedagogical decolonial endeavour.

We would argue that it has been a step in the right direction – both in demanding more in terms of critical thinking of our student as well as provided us as critical educators with important insights into ways to present counter stories to the dominant Nordic exceptionalist narrative. We believe that such collaborative

'tinkering' (Murphy, 2024) and reflection opens spaces where together we can work toward decolonising within our small sphere of influence with our students.

Discussion

Our collaborative journey in revising the Globalisation and Sustainable Development course tells the (counter)story of both the possibilities and persistent challenges of decolonising education within the specific context of Norwegian higher education. While we write this story as 'we', what we did or tried as pedagogical interventions, the distinct but complementary relationships to racial capitalism which we experience and contribute to the collaboration are central for disrupting Nordic exceptionalism. This is because of the affective and intellectual labour required to sustain transformative educational practice within resistant institutional structures. We practice *acuerpar* by caring and supporting from out of our situatedness. As both Zembylas' (2021) discussion of abolitionist universities and Murphy's (2024) discussion of weak utopia and pedagogical 'tinkering' highlight, the decolonial struggle is an ongoing creative process rather than a utopian end.

Complementarity: While perhaps difficult to convey fully, an important factor for us as educators is the collaboration and understanding how different experiences of racial capitalism generate synergistic critical analysis that neither of us could achieve individually (Doumbia et al., 2025). Dansholm's experience as a white woman whose foreign work experience was systematically de-legitimised upon returning to Norway provided insight into how Nordic institutions manage potentially disruptive knowledge. Zeleke's navigation of being simultaneously celebrated as proof of Nordic equality while experiencing ongoing racialisation revealed the psychological violence of tokenism. Together, these perspectives enabled us to develop pedagogical strategies, such as the Farouk al-Kasim assignment, that make Nordic racism visible to students who have been socialised to overlook it.

This complementarity extends beyond personal experience to pedagogical strategy. When Zeleke challenges students directly about Norwegian racism, they can dismiss it as bias or 'playing the race card'. When Dansholm introduces the same critiques, students may listen but can also discount it as a 'foreign' perspective (Gobena et al., 2025). Together, however, we persist in Quayson's (2000, p. 34) "studied disruption of everydayness", or taken for granted norms, re-interpreting institutional expectations to systematically undermine Nordic exceptionalism's epistemological foundations.

Pedagogical challenge: Our collaborative teaching and discussion reveal Nordic exceptionalism as a particularly sophisticated form of abyssal thinking that requires targeted counterstrategies. Unlike contexts where colonial legacies are more obvious, Nordic humanitarian superpower narratives (Vesterdal, 2019) create cognitive barriers that make students resistant to critical analysis. The surface veneer of Nordic

virtue functions as epistemological armour, protecting students from recognising their own society's participation in racial capitalism (Eriksen et al., 2024; Ursin & Lysså, 2024).

Our pedagogical 'tinkering' (Murphy, 2024) suggests that this narrative can be challenged. Students' initial shock at learning about Farouk al-Kasim's erased contributions to Norwegian prosperity, or their growing recognition of problematic development interventions, demonstrates that cognitive disruption can foster critical thinking when supported by pedagogical scaffolding and collaborative dialogue. Such interventions do not guarantee critical student outcomes, but they do interrupt dominant discourses through the telling of other stories.

It is important to note that this discussion is limited by our individual positionalities and the emphasis on reflexivity regarding small steps, or 'tinkering', rather than formal assessment. There is much more that could be explored about the nuances of our racialised experiences, and of negotiating interactions with students and institutions. But as a first step, we have chosen to focus on sharing reflections on our experiences in collaboratively decolonising our pedagogy within the context of the Nordics.

As takeaways, we would argue, firstly, that collaboration that brings together educators with different but complementary relationships to systems of oppression can create pedagogical possibilities that individual effort cannot achieve. As Doumbia, Nahr, and Tangara (2025) argue, acknowledging our epistemic limitations contributes to more balanced collaboration. We need interdisciplinary synergies as well as diversity of positionality (Gobena et al., 2025) to work together. This requires moving beyond superficial understandings of diversity or typical collegial acquaintances toward relational support and deep solidarity (Méndez, 2023). The emotional labour of repeatedly confronting student resistance, institutional constraints, and our own limitations necessitates decolonial care networks that can sustain transformative practice over time.

Second, incremental transformation through pedagogical 'tinkering' (Murphy, 2024) may be more sustainable than dramatic curricular overhaul. Our gradual introduction of critical materials, combined with scaffolded discussions and concrete local examples created space for student learning without triggering institutional backlash. The abolitionist university is a long-term process (Zembylas, 2021).

Third, context matters. Decolonial strategies that work in obviously (post)colonial contexts may not translate directly to Nordic settings where exceptionalist narratives require different forms of cognitive disruption. Understanding how racial capitalism operates specifically within the idyllic egalitarian Nordic welfare states enables more targeted pedagogical interventions (Eriksen et al., 2024).

Conclusion

In this article, through a counter story-telling approach, we have told a story that we believe will resonate with other educators at the margins. In centring and problematising Nordic exceptionalism, we both acknowledge the challenge and pose critical questions to this belief system. We share the story of our ongoing journey in order to make the struggle visible and explore possibilities. Lastly, through highlighting our own pedagogical intervention, we share our real work in order to also imagine a way to break through the limitations of the single story to recognise the pluriverse.

The question of what decolonising means in the context of Norway and Nordic exceptionalism (Eriksen et al., 2024) remains central to our ongoing work, and our reflection represents a small contribution to the broader project of decolonising education within the constraints (Murphy, 2024) and possibilities of Nordic higher education. Our experience suggests that such work requires sustained commitment, collegial solidarity, and willingness to remain vulnerable to the ongoing challenges of transformative practice while simultaneously recognising the specific pedagogical challenges within the Nordic context: Nordic exceptionalism's obfuscation of complicity in global injustices and the need for epistemological transformation.

Moving forward, we aim to continue pedagogical 'tinkering' (Murphy, 2024) with our courses, as well as incorporating more systematic ways of documenting our students' learning processes to better understand how critical consciousness develops within Nordic contexts. We aim to develop or tap into networks with other Nordic educators attempting similar transformations to share strategies and support each other in our collective commitment to the decolonial abolitionist university. Through collaborative pedagogical 'tinkering' and critical reflection, we believe it is possible to work towards decolonising, creating more just and inclusive educational spaces, even within existing institutional constraints: one course and one collaboration at a time.

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