

# Using Fine Art to dismantle colonisation in the Business School

**Dr Caroline Chapain, Birmingham Business School**

**Dr Emma Surman, Birmingham Business School**

**Jen Ridding, The Barber Institute of Fine Arts**

**Jon Sleigh, Freelance Arts Curator**



## **1. The Practical bit – what did we do?**

### **Background**

Business schools in the UK can be viewed as engines of colonisation, as they reproduce Western knowledge and practices about business and management, which serve to silence knowledge and practices from elsewhere. Decolonising business education and tackling any colonial legacies in terms of what we teach (curriculum) and how we teach (pedagogy) is thus integral to any business school that aims to promote sustainable and responsible management practices and train responsible organisational leaders of the future.

Decolonising goes beyond diversifying and requires academics and academic institutions to be reflexive; acknowledging their privilege, their positions and their modes of operation. This is necessary to identify the ways in which they may produce or reproduce neo-colonial practices within and outside academia.

This means that both teachers and students need opportunities to engage in reflexive practice to identify and then disrupt the constraints imposed on them by colonial legacies in their particular curricula and context, and develop new ways of being, thinking, doing and interacting with others.

However, questions remain as to how to enact these decolonising principles in practice. This project addresses these questions by offering an innovative teaching approach using arts to dismantle decolonisation in Business Schools. In doing so, it supports the following [SDGs](#): 4 (quality education), 5 (gender equality), 10 (reduced inequalities), 11 (sustainable cities), 12 (responsible consumption and production) and 16 (peace justice and strong institutions). It also addresses the [PRME principles](#).

### **The Collaboration**

The project involved a collaboration between two academics working at [Birmingham Business School](#) (BBS) at the University of Birmingham (UoB) and staff at [the Barber Institute of Fine Arts](#) (the Barber). The Barber is an art gallery situated on UoB's Edgbaston campus. It displays a collection of fine art that is owned by an independent charity, The Henry Barber Trust, who also fund 70% of the Barber's activities, whilst UoB own the Grade I listed building in which the collection is housed.

Slow looking and slow learning are embedded within the Barber's philosophy and approach to learning and engagement. Galleries and museums present unique and valuable opportunities for students to step into a different space, physically and mentally, perhaps adopting a different pace, a different headspace and a different perspective. This is valuable in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when it can be easy to become overwhelmed with a continual stream of digital data, visual imagery and loud voices. When the collaboration between the Barber and BBS began, the Barber had already begun to develop practices around interdisciplinary HE teaching, having [collaborated with UoB's College of Medical and Dental Sciences](#) to design and deliver [in-gallery seminars](#) for nursing and medical students which

use art to facilitate learning about death, dying and bereavement. The Barber is also proactively engaged in cross-organisation [decolonisation work](#) which includes many diverse strands of activity such as researching and reinterpreting the collection, equipping the staff to facilitate uncomfortable and challenging conversations, and engaging with these topics through its public engagement programme. The Barber refers to this vital ongoing work as 'unlearning' and 'relearning'.

## Project objectives

This project had four key objectives:

- to encourage students to reflect on the legacy of colonisation within the business school curriculum;
- to encourage students to identify and dismantle the dominant (Western) hegemonic ways of thinking that tend to feature with the business school setting;
- to offer students alternative and creative ways to explore this topic by working with embodied artefacts and metaphors; and
- to enable students from diverse backgrounds to develop the confidence to question orthodox approaches and share their own cultural perspectives.

## Approach

One of the key underpinning principles of the project was to work across disciplinary perspectives to bring BBS students to the Barber gallery (i.e. outside the usual classroom) and use the art to generate conversation about decolonisation in business studies. In collaboration with staff at the Barber, the BBS academics discussed the aims of each module, spent time in the gallery, and selected a small number of works from the Barber's collection to include in student workshops to illustrate particular business themes with regards to colonial legacies. These items included fine art paintings, sculptures and historic artefacts.

Each workshop comprised a visit to the Barber gallery which focused on these works. During the workshops, students were taken on a journey through the gallery and encouraged to look carefully and slowly at each of the selected works. This 'slow looking' approach<sup>1</sup> encourages students to focus and dwell on specific elements in each artwork, in addition to looking at the artwork as a whole and then focusing on the colours, shapes, lines, balance and movement of the piece etc. (see Appendix 1). Please look at the accompanying video for an insight into how the slow looking approach was implemented in this project.

After looking at each artwork, the workshop leader provided information about its history and the artist, focusing on aspects of the piece that echoed themes discussed within each

---

<sup>1</sup> Inspired by the work of Shari Tishman (2018) *Slow Looking. The Arts and Practice of Learning Through Observation*. London: Routledge.

module. Students were then invited to share their thoughts, feelings and reactions to the piece. This could be done verbally, or if preferred students were able to note this on an accompanying booklet handed to each student at the start of the tour.

Given the sensitive nature of the topics discussed during the workshops, each workshop was foregrounded by ethical ground rules and a safeguarding process to ensure consensual and respectful conversation and allow participants to opt out of the workshop at any point if they needed to.

## **2. Module specifics**

The project involved students from two very distinct modules within BBS. While sharing a common approach the respective workshops therefore had differences in content as well as delivery as detailed in the tables below.

| <b>Management Education and Learning (MEL)</b>  |  |
|---|--|
| <b>About the Module</b>   |  |
| MEL is first-year compulsory module on the BSc Management suite of programmes delivered to approx. 400 students. Demographic data shows that 40% of students are of British nationality, 40% are of Chinese nationality with the remaining 20% cover a wide spread of nationalities. The module focuses on introducing students to the principles of responsible management education with an emphasis on equality, diversity and inclusion. It also supports their personal and professional development and the development of academic skills such critical thinking, reflection/reflexivity and academic writing.   |  |
| <b>Workshop Delivery</b>  |  |
| Due to the size of the module, it was not possible for Barber staff to be involved in the delivery of the workshops, which instead were delivered by the module leader, or one of four seminar tutors. Each workshop lasted one hour. Both the module leader and the tutors received training by the staff at the Barber prior to the workshops to assist with delivery. The workshops were foregrounded by in-class activities, online preparation material and readings on decolonisation and art management education. The workshops were also followed by a debrief seminar with tutors to recap student learning and identify implications for their management practice.  |  |
| <b>Art works and curriculum links</b>   |  |
| Examples of art works discussed during the workshop included:<br><i>Head of Prudence</i> , a marble double headed piece from the 15 <sup>th</sup> century that represents one of the four cardinal virtues. This was used to discuss values, critical thinking and the influence of the past on the present.<br><i>Ikegobo to the Iyoba</i> – this hand altar piece, which was looted by the British Army from Benin in 1897, represents another example of values, this one from the Benin tribe. It was used to contrast with Prudence (above) in addition to highlighting colonial legacies.<br><i>Ecce Homo</i> by Van Dyke – this painting depicts Christ and a black Roman centurion and was used to discuss slavery and the representation of people of colour in the past and reflect on what it means today. |  |

## Responsible Marketing and society

### About the Module

Responsible Marketing and Society (RMS) is an optional postgraduate module which comprises approx. 150 students. Students are mainly Chinese with the remainder a mix of British and other Asian nationalities.

The module explores the criticisms of, and responsibility challenges in marketing and consumption, considering both theoretical and practical perspectives. The content focuses on ethics and sustainability in marketing and consumption practices. It also examines the nature of markets and moral accountability in the marketplace as well as encouraging students to consider and critique their own consumption behaviours.

### Workshop and associated activities

Each RMS student took part in a two-hour workshop at the Barber gallery delivered by a Freelance Arts curator in conjunction with the module lead.

Seminars prior to the workshop focused on introducing and discussing the subject of decolonisation and the impact this has on marketing knowledge and practices. Post workshop seminars reflected on the workshop visit and discussed a case study activity based on exhibits discussed at the Barber.

During the workshop students completed a booklet with their thoughts, reactions and reflections in relation to each piece of art and subsequently produced a short piece of written work in the form of a personal reflection on the workshop and associated activities. This was submitted as part of their module assessment. The submission of this work was required but not graded.

### Art works and curriculum links

Examples of art works visited during the workshop and links to the module curriculum included:

*Ikegobo to the Iyoba* – this piece from Benin, which was looted by the British Army in 1897, was used to discuss ethics in relation to supply chains and consumption.

*Ecce Homo* by Van Dyke – this painting depicts Christ and a black Roman centurion and was used to discuss slavery and the representation of people of colour both in the past and in contemporary times. It also led to wider discussions on the power and impact of imagery and how this is used in marketing messages.

## 3. Learning and reflections

### Student Reflections and Learning

Students on both modules responded very positively to the workshops. 94% of students on the Responsible Marketing and Society (RMS) module said that they enjoyed it. 87% of the students on Management Education and Learning (MEL) found that the art was either helpful or very helpful in relation to critical thinking, reflexivity and responsible management education and values<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> Feedback was collected from 155 students across the two modules (67 on the PG module and 82 on the UG module) before and after the workshops through a mix of closed and open survey questions. Two-third of the students in the survey identified as female (78% on the PG module versus 59% on the UG module). Forty-four percent of the students surveyed

Research findings also show the workshop increased the level of understanding of decolonisation, compared to before the workshop:

**Question: Do you feel that you understand what decolonisation is and the ways in which it is relevant to this module?**

|                 | RMS    |       | MEL    |       |
|-----------------|--------|-------|--------|-------|
|                 | Before | After | Before | After |
| <b>Yes</b>      | 39%    | 57%   | 29%    | 62%   |
| <b>Somewhat</b> | 44%    | 38%   | 52%    | 30%   |
| <b>No</b>       | 17%    | 4%    | 19%    | 7%    |

Many students also highlighted how the workshops revealed new knowledge or new reflections on their own realities that they had not previously considered. This realisation reinforced for them the importance of being more critical in their thinking when approaching new knowledge to identify hidden meanings and assumptions. For many, it also changed their perceptions of themselves and/or others and made them aware of their own role in not reproducing unethical behaviours and of what they could actively do to tackle colonial legacies and promote equality.

Students feedback about the workshops included the following:

*'It [the workshop] has taught me that no stone should be left unturned and that everything in business and marketing should be questioned to reveal its past. It has also really emphasised the historical basis of marketing, something which is perhaps wrongly named as a modern subject' (British student, Responsible Marketing & Society from a white background)*

*'...first I learnt about the decolonisation in Business Schools, I could not get the connection between decolonisation and management education clearly. However, by this workshop, it become possible for me to understand the undermined (sic) colonisation in people's mind and necessity to get rid of them' (International student on Management Education & Learning from a BAME background)*

*'It (the workshop) has made me realise the importance of using my voice and knowledge to shed light on stories that are not otherwise told' (International student on Responsible Marketing & Society from a BAME background)*

---

were from Britain; this proportion was higher on the UG module (55%). Indeed, the PG was more international in focus with 70% of students being from outside Britain, in particular from China (43%) and the rest of Asia (19%). The diversity of the students on the modules is reflected in the survey ethnicity data. While 28% of students surveyed identified as white British, 15% identified as either from a non-British white background or from a white and mixed background. Other backgrounds included: Chinese (26%), Indian, Pakistani or Bangladeshi (17%), any other Asian backgrounds (6%) and African, Caribbean or Arab backgrounds (8%).

*“(it has encouraged me to) ensure everyone is appreciated for their difference, even if I can't relate to them.” (British student on the Management Education and Learning module from a BAME background)*

Finally, many students welcomed the space the workshops opened-up to speak about discrimination and decolonisation, to tackle taboos and to be more inclusive:

*“when it comes to things like decolonisation and things like racism [...] the only way it will stop being the taboo and will make a difference is when people, when white people, are speaking about it and making known that this is important. And they understand it. [...] So, the fact that the university is wanting to speak about it and make decolonisation such an important part of the module. I think that's a great place to start.” (British student on the Management Education and Learning module from a BAME background)*

#### **4. How could you use this approach?**

The initial aim of this project was to produce a case study from which others can learn. Having designed and run the workshops, it has become evident that this specific activity is not something that can be easily replicated. Hence, there is no check list that will enable an easy reproduction of the same workshop. However, consideration of the following thoughts and ideas will enable the creation of a similar activity that will be meaningful to you, your students and the context in which you teach.

#### **Finding collaborations and/or using alternative pedagogical material and approaches**

Not every Higher Education Institution is lucky enough to have a world class art gallery located on campus. However, the approach used in this case could be used and would be more meaningful, if adapted to local contexts.

For example, you could look to:

- work with local galleries, museums or heritage sites;
- develop an outdoor workshop, taking a walking tour and using buildings, architecture and your local environment (whether urban or rural) as your focus;
- ask students to bring in an object which is important to them and base the workshop on looking at these; and
- ask students to discuss places that are important to them or that they have found thought provoking.

#### **Important things to think about**

The use of artefacts from the gallery and the slow looking approach were crucial in allowing both students and BBS staff to bring to the fore their subjectivities and relate to the subject

in their own way. This approach helped reveal a wide range of perspectives and experiences that were beneficial to conversations on decolonisation both in terms of content and experiential learning. However, this project took more time, energy and emotion than initially anticipated. The approach discussed here is not a 'quick fix'. Anyone embarking on a similar activity would need to be prepared to make a very personal investment. If you do, it can be very rewarding.

## Key Elements

Five elements were key in framing the approach to this project:

1. **Space** - teaching in a non-classroom environment that embodied the topic under discussion helped provide an experiential space for a different kind of reflection. It facilitated different conversations and opened new ways of thinking. Logistically using different spaces can be challenging to schedule, so it is recommended that you allow plenty of lead-in time for planning the practicalities.
2. **Finding ways to access emotions** - using art and an approach (slow looking) that crosses disciplinary boundaries allowed for emotions, subjectivities and personal experiences to be brought to the fore in an environment where there is no right or wrong answer. This meant that in our case, the workshop could not authentically be delivered by everyone in the same way. Each tutor, tour lead etc, found routes into the material in ways that related to them. The art became powerful when people made it 'their own' and could deliver it with authenticity and purpose.
3. **Safeguarding** - putting in place safeguarding for both students and staff generated a pedagogical approach based on care and trust to create the type of dialogue necessary to support decolonial journeys for staff and students in a positive and empowering way.
4. **Embed with other activities** - developing learning outcomes so decolonisation was embedded throughout our modules (with pre- and post-workshops learning activities and in relation to the theme of each module), is essential to ensure that decolonisation is not just treated as an add-on.
5. **Take a reflexive approach** - adopt a decolonial reflexive approach by documenting the process and collecting feedback from both students and staff to reflect on the experience.

## Related questions

In relation to these points, questions that you can ask yourselves as you develop your own approach could be:

Q) How do you want to include decolonisation within your teaching (i.e. content and/or pedagogy) and embed it within your module in a meaningful way?

Q) What is your local context? How does it link to questions related to colonisation/decolonisation?

Q) How can you take into account students' prior learning and experiences with regards to the specific colonial/decolonial context in which you are teaching?

Q) What lived experience and expertise do you have available to draw on? E.g. academic and professional services colleagues, students, external partners etc.

Q) Who might be available to partner with?

Q) How much time and energy do you have to develop interdisciplinary conversations?

Q) Have you considered the safeguarding of both students, project leads and facilitators- what mechanisms can you put in place?

Q) How will you document and evidence the learning, both your own and your students, and how can you encourage reflexivity?

Q) How can you share your learning with colleagues, partners and students to extend the reach of this work?

## **Limitations**

In this project working with art was helpful in bringing to the fore the emotions and subjectivities of students and staff and was crucial in creating the experiential learning generated in the workshops. However, it is important to note that the artefacts available in the gallery focus on British history and Eurocentric representations of the World. As such, this restricted and contradicted our attempts to explore the meaning and relevance of decolonisation.

In addition, it is important to note that many pieces of arts were reminders of British colonial violence that can be difficult to experience for students, including those from BAME backgrounds, even though we made sure to have a rigorous safeguarding process in place.

Related to this, as we conducted conversations with our students around colonisation and decolonisation, it brought to light the differential understandings that each student had of this topic, especially in relation to British or European colonial history. Some students were highly cognisant of these legacies and/ or could relate to the experience of colonisation. Others were not so familiar with the details of British or European history, or of the impacts and involvement with colonisation by or in their home countries. This is not something we had adequately prepared for prior to running the workshops. It is important to remember that everybody is starting this conversation from a different point of departure and that this needs to be accounted for in terms of planning the sessions.

## **5. Useful links and resources**

If you would like to find out more about the project, or our approach, here are some additional links:

- 1) Blog post about the workshop and the collaboration between BBS and the Barber:  
<https://barber.org.uk/gallery-training-is-the-business/>

- 2) Birmingham Business School Decolonisation project website:  
<https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/business/research/research-projects/decolonising-the-business-school/index.aspx>Barber website:  
<https://barber.org.uk/>

- 3) Barber Ikegobo to the Iyoba resources:

<https://barber.org.uk/unknown-west-african-artist/>

<https://barber.org.uk/ikegobo-to-the-iyoba-barber-schools-resource/>

- 4) Further information on Slow Looking:

[https://www.routledge.com/Slow-Looking-The-Art-and-Practice-of-Learning-Through-Observation/Tishman/p/book/9781138240414?gclid=Cj0KCQjwtkBhDIARIsAL6LorfOIXODY3PYF3AS2s-Y2QEmduw-OlsKAxhwhINr6lpR7zeao\\_DTbQaAtzUEALw\\_wcB](https://www.routledge.com/Slow-Looking-The-Art-and-Practice-of-Learning-Through-Observation/Tishman/p/book/9781138240414?gclid=Cj0KCQjwtkBhDIARIsAL6LorfOIXODY3PYF3AS2s-Y2QEmduw-OlsKAxhwhINr6lpR7zeao_DTbQaAtzUEALw_wcB)



This work was supported by PRME UK&I as part of their innovative pedagogy funding awards.

We would like to express our thanks to all at PRME UK&I for their support with this work and our students and module tutors who approached the project with such openness and generosity.

We hope that we have inspired you to think about the ways art, of all varieties can be used to enhance teaching practices, especially in relation to sensitive or difficult topics such as decolonisation.

**If you would like to find out more, please do get in touch.**

**Caroline Chapain, Birmingham Business School** [c.a.chapain@bham.ac.uk](mailto:c.a.chapain@bham.ac.uk)

**Emma Surman, Birmingham Business School** [e.l.surman@bham.ac.uk](mailto:e.l.surman@bham.ac.uk)

Caroline and Emma worked in collaboration with:

Jen Ridding, The Barber Institute of Fine Arts

Jon Sleigh, Freelance Arts Curator

## Appendix 1:

### YOU MIGHT WANT TO CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING AND THEIR CONTRIBUTION TO YOUR INTERPRETATION:



Lines: are the lines curved, jagged, rough or sketchy, is there a line of sight (are the figures in the piece all looking/pointing the same way?)



Colour: what hue is present (red, green, blue etc), is the colour light or dark, how intense is the colour and how do the colours work together?



Space: how much space is there around and between objects, what is the perspective (depth), are objects overlapping and are there empty spaces?



Light: is the piece light or dark, warm or cool, natural or artificial, when discussing a sculpture how does light influence the piece?



Shape: are the shapes geometric or are they more natural, is there one dominant shape or are there a variety of shapes?



Balance: how do the shapes, colours, textures etc work together, are they harmonious or not?



Movement: does the piece create a sense of movement, if so how and what?



Focal point: is there a particular focal point in the piece, is there more than one? Why are you attracted to that focal point?