

Pedagogies of social justice and cultural democracy in media higher education

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Abstract

The institutional culture within the UK higher education sector is largely Eurocentric, failing to represent the ethnically and culturally diverse student population, and contributing to disparate outcomes for students that do not fit the dominant cultural model. The NUS argue that the curriculum should tackle structural inequalities in society, as well as embedding equality and diversity. Social justice education meets this ideal, with advocates charging that education systems reproduce social inequalities in the wider society by reinforcing the status quo; although education institutions can play a key role in promoting social change. Despite the reproduction of racial stereotypes through the media, outside media literacy, the potential for implementation of social justice pedagogy in media education is yet to be realized. This article proposes pedagogies of social justice and cultural democracy as an effective strategy for promoting social change in the communication industries. It draws on a final year undergraduate unit focused on race, ethnicity and culture and linked to degrees in advertising, public relations, marketing communications and politics as a case study. The findings of an end of unit survey suggest that students can develop the critical consciousness necessary to analyze and critique problematic racialized representations in the communication industries in future employment and become agents of change.

Keywords: social justice pedagogy | cultural democracy | race and ethnicity | media education | curriculum diversification

Introduction

Student populations have increased in ethnic diversity in recent years. For the 2013/14 academic year, 20.4 per cent of first year undergraduate and postgraduate students in the UK were from a BME background (HESA, 2015). By comparison, for the 2004/5 academic year, people from BME backgrounds accounted for just 16 per cent of the UK student population (Sims, 2007). In general, racialized minority communities have higher participation rates than their White counterparts (Connor et al., 2004; Sims, 2007). Despite this increased diversity, the institutional culture within higher education institutions has changed very little, contributing to disparate experiences and outcomes for students that do not fit the dominant cultural model that is largely Eurocentric (Aldridge, 2000; Mighty, 2001). The NUS (2012) argue that 'liberation', in terms of actively working to challenge and tackle structural inequalities in society, should be embedded into the curriculum alongside equality and diversity.

Structural inequalities based on intersectional experiences of race, ethnicity and culture exist across public and private sector organisations, including the media and creative industries. It is my position that in media education, the curriculum should include liberation strategies to enable students to develop the knowledge and cultural competencies necessary to become agents of change, enhancing communications practice when they take up employment.

This article discusses a curriculum 'liberation strategy' I developed based on pedagogies of social justice and cultural democracy as powerful, complementary forces for social change. It draws on a case study of a final year undergraduate optional unit I created for Corporate Marketing Communications degrees in advertising, public

relations, marketing communications and politics called Media Inequality. The unit critically examines the processes through which social inequalities are maintained and perpetuated in and through the media, through the lens of race, ethnicity and culture, with centralised analysis around whiteness. The findings of a small-scale student survey are used to evaluate perceptions of their cultural competencies and perceptions of their potential to contribute to positive changes in the communication industries.

Background

The curriculum represents a key terrain for ongoing struggles for inclusion and equality. Scholars and activists argue that the ideological and philosophical assumptions that underpin higher education and shape the institutional culture within it — including mainstream curricula, are largely drawn from the socio-historical experiences of White middle and upper class males (Aldridge, 2000; Blay, 2008; Darder, 1994; Mighty, 2001) through theories that are presented as ‘THE objective, unbiased truth’ (Mighty, 2001:4). The academic environment therefore privileges predominantly White middle and upper class males, while marginalizing people from racialized minority backgrounds, women and the working classes.

Diversifying the curriculum and democratizing the cultural environment has broader institutional and societal benefits beyond promoting equality and inclusion. Firstly, it ensures that all students develop the cultural competencies necessary to access global career opportunities within increasingly internationalized labour markets. Furthermore, studies show that students that are exposed to diverse cultures and perspectives are better motivated and prepared to participate more fully in civic life. Interactions and experiences on campus can lead to significant changes in attitudes

towards inequality, prompting greater involvement in community and political issues (Bowman, 2011). Promoting civic responsibility and engagement is of paramount importance as British society continues to become more ethnically and culturally diverse, with the impact of globalization directly affecting the labour market and transnational movement of capital (Sims, 2007).

Social justice pedagogy is concerned with creating educational environments 'conducive to engaged, critical and empowered thinking and action' (Hackman, 2006:103). Cultural democracy is based on the principle that all ethnic and cultural groups should 'be active participants in the world with an equal right to the cultural, economic and political power available within society' (Aldridge, 2000:103). In the context of higher education this means including and valuing 'the complexity and variety of views which have shaped the boundaries of knowledge' and 'expands rather than restricts our view of the world' (ibid.;101). A culturally democratic approach necessitates questioning how race, ethnicity and culture shape institutional environments through language, professional practice and social norms.

Higher education institutions can make an important contribution to promoting social change in society by preparing students of all ethnic backgrounds to be informed citizens in a diverse world, for which they require cultural competence. Cultural competence is defined as 'a set of congruent behaviours, attitudes and policies that come together in a system, agency or among professionals [that enable them] to work effectively in cross-cultural situations' (Cross et al., 1989). People of colour often develop bicultural competence independently of educational environments because they are constantly dealing with the divergence between their own constructions of

identity and the stereotypical representations of racialized identity that confront them in their everyday lives (Alfred, 2001), in and through the media, through popular culture and in their interactions with others. Valuing cultural competence in higher education demonstrates recognition that psychological growth is equally as important as the acquisition of knowledge in relation to learning (Amico, 2015).

Patrick Blessinger (2016), Chief Research Scientist for the International Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association, observes that inclusion and diversity in higher education has become a priority on the global education agenda. The current momentum is driven by globalization and internationalization as key forces and further spearheaded by mass social movements and the UN Declaration of lifelong learning as a human right. In the UK, The Equality Act 2010 set out the Government's Equality Strategy for building a fairer Britain, identifying a pressing need to address the causes of inequality. However, progress on equality has stalled in recent years and in some areas has begun to reverse, despite increased legislation and regulation (HM Government, 2010). Therefore, In August 2016, the Government announced an audit to tackle racial inequalities in public services with the aim to end disparities. The Higher Education Green Paper provides a focus on students from racialized minority backgrounds, with the intention of increasing the number attending university by 20 per cent. Finally, OFFA strategic guidance 2017-18 calls on institutions to identify and address trends in BME student admissions, continuation rates and degree attainment. Given these global and national imperatives, it is my contention that teaching can play a more significant role both in promoting the success, retention and progression of

students of colour, and in helping to promote social change in communications practice by challenging problematic representations of people of colour.

Social justice educators argue that education systems largely exist to preserve the status quo and accordingly reproduce and perpetuate the values and practices of the dominant culture. Education is perceived as a site where democratic ideals should be embraced and practiced with the aim of bringing about social change in society (Mthethwa-Sommers, 2014). The author posits that a range of theories align with social justice education, such as critical, critical race, postmodern, post-structural, feminist etc. but that two common ideas in the theories serve as the operational definition. The first is recognition that education systems confer privilege for members of the dominant group and disadvantage for minoritized groups and the second is advocacy for social transformation to create more just societies (ibid.;) The Media Inequality unit is focused on social justice education centred around race, ethnicity and culture in communications practice and incorporates critical race theory, Whiteness and Black feminism as key conceptual approaches. Bell et al. (2007:123) assert that incorporating racism and White privilege into curriculum design can enable students from all ethnic backgrounds 'to develop a more sophisticated understanding of racism' where the knowledge acquired can support future work around anti-racist strategies. However, this is discussed in relation to anti-racist education, rather than discipline-specific subjects like media. Culturally relevant pedagogical approaches have been acknowledged for their role in helping to prepare students for change in their communities and the broader society' (Espositio and Swain, 2009:38). However, while it is acknowledged in social justice education literature that the media is a key site of socialization and can

perpetuate racial stereotypes (Bell et al., 2007), discussion on adopting social justice pedagogy within media higher education is largely absent, although Scharrer and Ramasubramanian (2015), in reference to the secondary education sector, acknowledge that there is a role for media literacy education in helping to address stereotypical representations perpetuated in and through the media. This article therefore advocates the integration of social justice pedagogy into media higher education as a new approach to promote social change within the communication industries. It presents the Media Inequality Unit as a case study of how media higher education can better meet student needs and the contemporary demands of higher education through the frameworks and pedagogies of social justice and cultural democracy.

Designing Teaching for Social Change

Media Inequality, a final year undergraduate optional unit, is set against a background of demographic changes relating to the racial, ethnic and cultural mix within the UK and other western societies, which has had a profound impact on consumer lifestyles and behaviour. However, inequalities linked to race, ethnicity and culture persist within media and communications practice, particularly around issues of representation. For example, in the advertising industry, scholars have argued that people of colour are under-represented in advertisements and that there is disparity in terms of how different ethnic groups are represented. Whites are more often portrayed in a wider variety of contexts and associated with high economic status, while racialized minorities tend to be cast in lower status and background roles (Crucefix, 2013; Martin, 1993; Seiter, 1990; Taylor, 1997). The literature asserts that people of colour are

subject to stereotypical representations linked to historical racist ideologies. As an example, in 2014, London estate agent Strutt and Parker produced a poster advertisement featuring a Black male dancer called Mark, in full pose on the left with the caption: 'Some Notting Hill folk were born to dance' and a suited White male called Jeremy on the right with the caption: 'Others to sell flats' (Palmer, 2014). The images and text reproduce stereotypes that echo racist ideologies from the 18th century that present White Europeans as intellectually superior to people of colour and Black Africans as innately athletic and intellectually inferior to Whites (Eze, 1997). The rationale for this unit is therefore to help students critically engage with contemporary issues around race, ethnicity and culture and their relationship with power across different media forms and to help them develop cultural competencies that can be applied in a professional context to industry. This unit is designed to help students develop critical understandings of historical and contemporary debates on the dynamics of race, ethnicity and culture in the communication industries, focusing on topical issues and interrogating different areas of communications practice. The assessments: a 10-minute video presentation and 4000-word industry report, have been especially designed to help students develop the confidence and skills to clearly articulate issues around communications practice, and to advance solutions across a range of industries.

In designing the new unit I was mindful of the varying ways in which students learn, from surface learning to deep learning. I was keen to design learning that encourages students to take the deeper approach as advocated by Biggs and Taggs (2003). I therefore structured the unit content into three key areas with the aim of making explicit the incremental stages of the learning process: 1) developing conceptual and theoretical

knowledge as tools for critical analysis; 2) understanding the key contemporary topical issues and debates and 3) applying both to the third area, communications practice. Having previously taught on other final year units (social communication and political journalism) I gained a strong sense of where students' interests lie and this guided me in the selection of the topical issues. I felt that including topics of interest to students would encourage them to be more reflective learners. Encouraging students to be more reflective helps them to relate learning to their own reality and to abstract meaning from the learning activity (Brockbank and Mc Gill, 1998). I also adopted a dialogical approach by including class discussions within seminars as a means of helping students better understand themselves and their relationships with others, encouraging self-development. Dialogical pedagogy involves the teacher and learner learning together, searching for the truth and experiencing intellectual growth (Jackson, 2008). The learning outcomes were carefully constructed to be consistent with outcomes for the development of cultural competence as outlined by Amico (2015:26), who suggests that such outcomes should include:

- Understanding culture as a social construct that extends beyond race and ethnicity.
- Being able to deconstruct dominant ideologies and to understand their impact on racialized groups.
- Being able to analyse and critique issues around race, ethnicity and culture.
- Being able to deconstruct dominant group privilege and to understand how their own lives and others are impacted by prejudice and racism.

I feel that Media Inequality will benefit students by enhancing their learning experience in a number of ways. My teaching practice aims to deliver transformational education by diversifying the curriculum and democratizing the cultural environment in which learning and teaching takes place. I believe that students of colour and international students especially, will benefit from the additional measures to promote inclusion and equality through a culturally democratic approach. Furthermore, the unit has been designed to help all students develop cultural competencies in communications practice both through oral and written skills. This is embedded throughout the three incremental stages of learning involving critical scholarship, engaging with contemporary debates through lectures and seminars, and through assessment. These new skills will greatly benefit students both in terms of promoting deep learning and in terms of increasing their employability. Learning and teaching methods were designed to fulfil the key aims of social justice pedagogy, which is helping students develop:

...critical analytical tools necessary to understand oppression and their own socialization within oppressive systems, and to develop a sense of agency and capacity to interrupt and change oppressive patterns and behaviours in themselves and in the institutions and communities of which they are a part. (Bell, 2007:2).

Media Inequality ran for the first time in the first semester of the 2016/17 academic year with 21 students and two seminar groups. In week three of the 13-week unit, a BBC Radio Solent reporter attended one of the teaching sessions to record interviews

for the Breakfast Show on how the unit can help bring positive changes to the advertising industry. Two students volunteered to take part in the interviews, while the remaining students contributed to the show by helping to select the adverts to be featured and providing feedback on the script which I created. They also became the audience during the recording of the show, helping to create the atmosphere of a live studio discussion. The key aim of incorporating the radio show into the unit was to help students prepare for a video presentation assessment that requires them to discuss topical issues in the media relating to race ethnicity and culture. By taking part in the development of the radio programme, students underwent the process of unpacking complex issues using specific examples, drawing on critical theories and articulating problems from an informed position. By participating in a radio show broadcast to thousands of listeners, this exercise helped students recognise how they can become agents of change, by raising awareness of problematic issues around race and representation with the aim of generating greater understanding and broadening people's perspectives. The assessments were carefully designed to meet a goal of social justice pedagogy: helping students to develop agency and resistance. A key principle of this approach is the belief that students can become agents of change and that '...people in both advantaged and targeted groups have a critical role to play in dismantling oppression and generating visions for a more socially just future' (Bell, 2007:13).

Evaluating Teaching for Social Change

Given the overall aims of the unit in terms of the development of cultural competencies and promoting social change in communications practice; I developed an

end of unit survey to evaluate student perceptions of their cultural competencies and their potential to contribute to positive changes in the communication industries. Key ethical issues that arise when researching students relate to consent and confidentiality. Students may feel compelled to take part in the research because of the teacher/student relationship and may be concerned that if they take part that they can be identified, which could negatively impact the teacher/student relationship. To address these concerns the online survey was designed to be completely anonymous to ensure privacy and protect student identities from the onset. An introduction to the survey fully explains its purpose and aims and emphasises participation is totally voluntary and not linked in any way to assessment. The survey was approved by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Committee and received a respectable response rate of 62 per cent. Figures for average survey responses vary tremendously. Comparable figures for higher education suggest between 16 and 38 per cent (Nottingham University), 27.7 per cent (Manchester University), while the HEA (2016) student academic experience survey had a response rate of 20 per cent.

Findings

Overall, responses to the end of unit survey demonstrate that all students had self-perceptions of high level understandings of dominant ideologies, theories on race, ethnicity and culture and White privilege, and felt more culturally competent than they did before completing the course. The questions were designed to evaluate the degree to which the desired outcomes for cultural competence have been met (questions one to five) and to evaluate whether a key aim of social justice pedagogy has been met (question six) developing a sense of agency (Bell, 2007). The first question was based

around students' understanding of the critical theories and concepts covered on the course that function as important tools for critical analysis. The responses (see Fig 1) demonstrate that all students perceive themselves to be highly knowledgeable of critical theories and concepts. This is important since critical paradigms can aid students in identifying hidden inequalities and encourage them 'to be deconstructive, to question, and to problematize issues' (Mwthehwa-Sommers, 2014: 21).

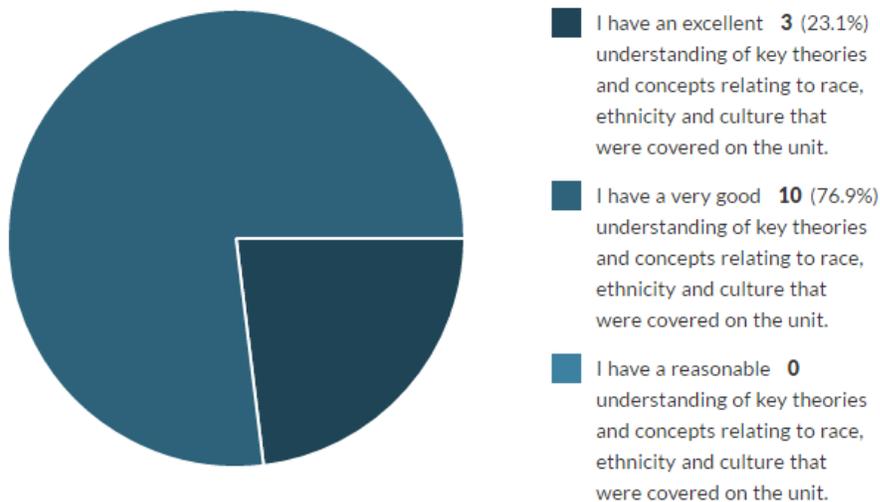


Fig 1 Critical tools of analysis

The second question is specifically focused on students' understanding of dominant ideologies. The responses (see Fig 2) demonstrate that all students perceive themselves to be highly knowledgeable of how dominant ideologies impact racialized groups.

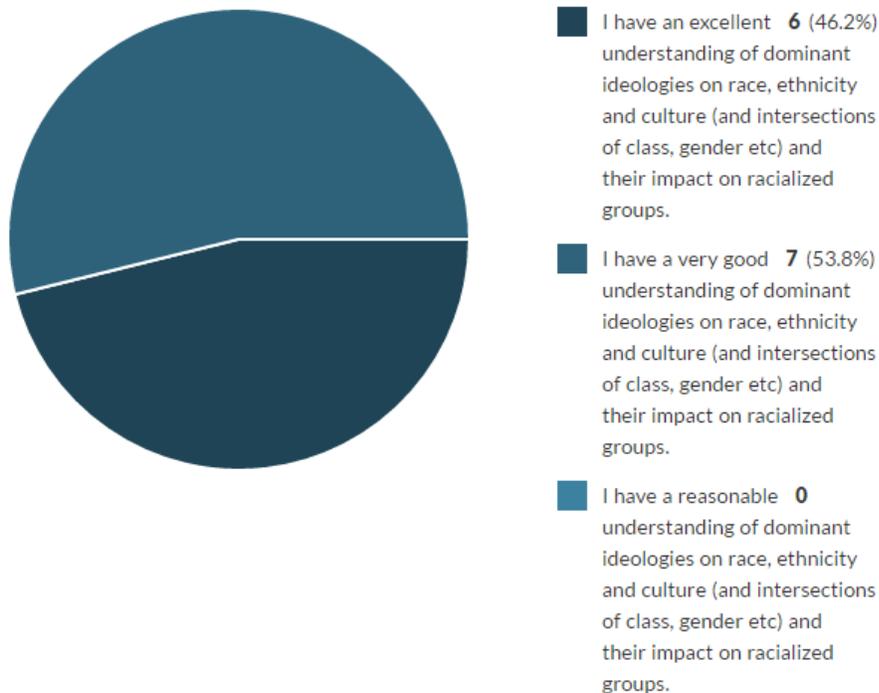


Fig 2 Dominant ideologies

A key focus of the course is helping students develop nuanced understandings of how dominant ideologies on race, ethnicity and culture influence cultural representations in the media that often perpetuate stereotypes. It is argued that the ultimate aim in teaching cultural competence should be social justice, which would be incomplete without the inclusion of content on racism (Kumagai and Lypson, 2009) given its persistence and prevalence in society. The third question is focused on students' understanding of White privilege. The responses (see Fig 3) demonstrate that most students perceive themselves to have an excellent understanding of this concept. Being able to analyse dominant group privilege is one of the desired outcomes of cultural competence (Amico, 2015). At the start of the lecture on Whiteness, nearly all of

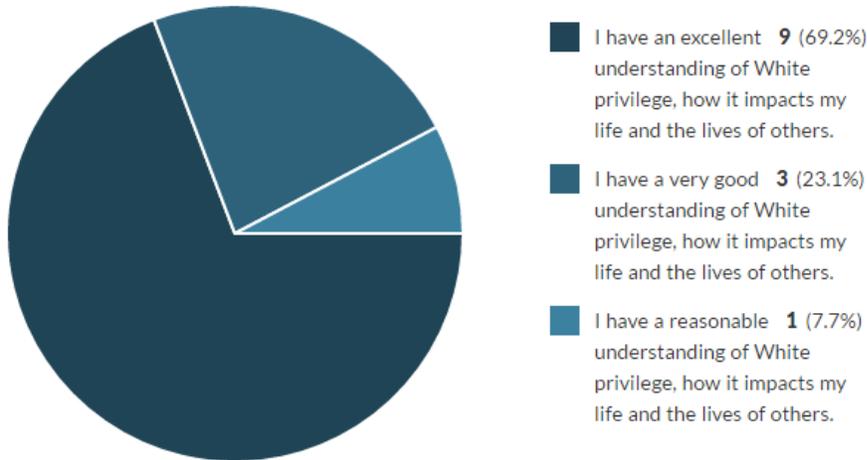


Fig 3 White privilege

the students stated that this was the first occasion on which they were taught this concept during the four years of their degree. This underlines the importance of incorporating the study of Whiteness into the unit since most students have no awareness of White privilege because ‘their textbooks reinforce the innocence of whiteness’ (Leonardo, 2004:138) and the prevalence of a colour-blind ideology masks the impact of race and White privilege (Scharrer and Ramasubramanian, 2015). Question four is focused on students’ perceptions of their discursive skills in analysis and critique. The responses (see Fig 4) demonstrate that all students feel confident in

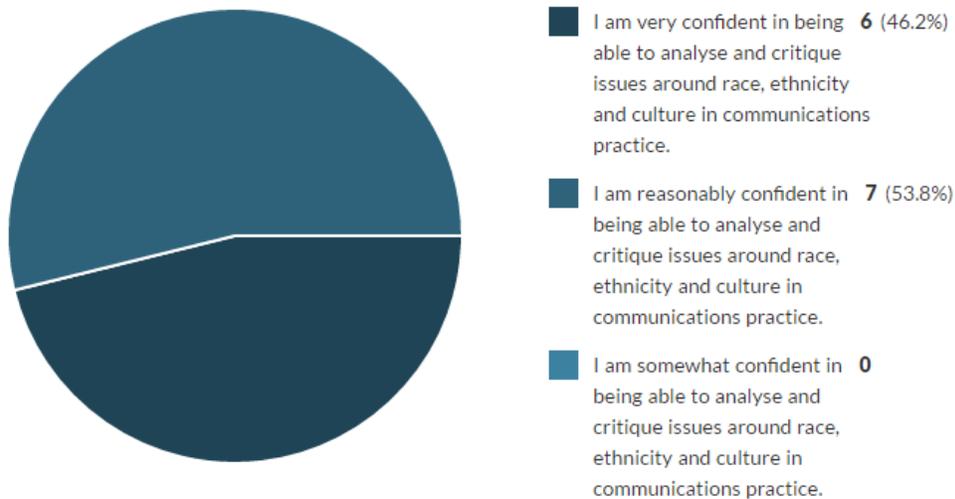


Fig 4 Critiquing issues

critiquing issues around race, ethnicity and culture in communications practice. The dialogical orientation of the seminars provided students with several opportunities to analyse and discuss examples they brought to class of problematic racialized representations. Over the duration of the course students became more accustomed to articulating complex ideas. The recording of the radio programme helped students appreciate the value of oral skills that might be used in team settings in communications-based employment. Advocacy is a key component of social transformation and reflects a sense of agency, or 'belief in the capacity of people as agents who can act to transform their world' (Bell, 2007: 13). Question five is focused on students' perceptions of their cultural competencies. The responses (see Fig 5) indicate

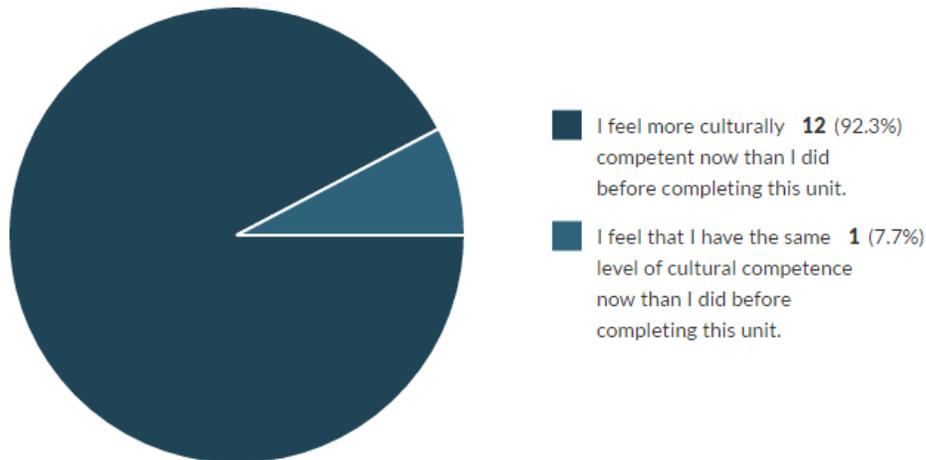


Fig 5 Cultural competence

that most students feel more culturally competent than they did at the start of the course. This is significant because cultural competence is not merely about the acquisition of knowledge but is ‘a type of thinking and knowing — a critical consciousness — of self, others and the world’ (Kumagai and Lipson, 2009:783). Question six is focused on students’ confidence in implementing changes in future employment. The responses (see Fig 6) show almost all of the students felt confident that they could contribute to improvement in the representation of people of colour, with the majority of respondents believing those changes would be significant. This is a good indicator that the unit has succeeded in helping students develop critical perspectives on communications practice that inspire ‘actions directed toward social change’ (Bell, 2007: 13).

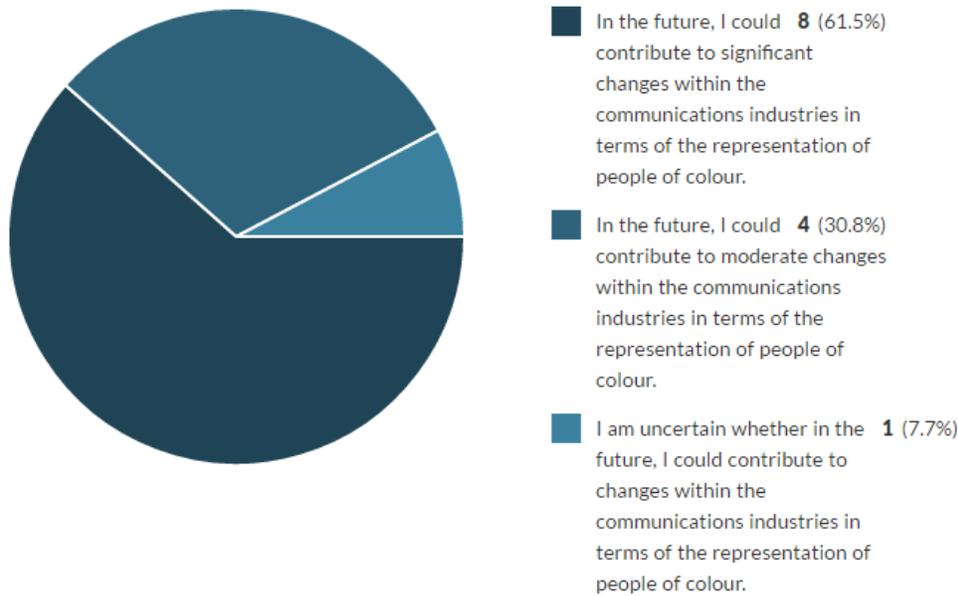


Fig 6 Social change

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that the Media Inequality unit meets recommended outcomes for the development of cultural competencies advocated by Amico (2015), who suggests that the overall aim in teaching and learning focused on cultural competence, should be 'to help students move from where they are positioned at the start to somewhere new that represents growth and self-actualization' (ibid.:27). Helping students develop awareness of how culture shapes attitudes and behaviour, how different ethnic groups live and exist within different social contexts and to develop awareness of individual prejudices are all arguably important in the development of cultural competencies (Seelman et al., 2009).

Three key goals for social justice education are to 'increase personal awareness, expand knowledge and encourage action', according to Bell and Griffin (2007:70). They

argue that by increasing personal awareness students better understand how their own socialization and social identities can contribute to assumptions and prejudices and how their membership of a particular ethnic group can confer privilege, which results in disadvantage for others outside this group. Expanding knowledge is best achieved through the inclusion of historical social and economic factors that reflect the evolution of oppression. Most students perceived themselves to have an excellent understanding of White privilege, its impact on their own life and the lives of others. This suggests that the goals of increased personal awareness and expansion of knowledge have been met. That most students felt confident in contributing to significant changes within the communication industries suggests that the goal of encouraging action has been met.

Conclusion

The Media Inequality unit was designed in response to the NUS (2012) call for 'liberation' — actively tackling structural inequalities in society, to be embedded in the curriculum alongside equality and diversity. Former NUS Black Students' Officer Kanja Sesay, suggests that liberating the curriculum can play 'an important role in the fight against racism' (NUS, 2012:5). The unit was also developed in response to global and national imperatives, including strategies to tackle racial inequalities in society and new widening participation guidelines. This article demonstrates through the Media Inequality case study, how teachers in media higher education can design and deliver more inclusive teaching based on the principles of social justice education, that prepares students to become active agents of change in the communication industries, where representations of race, ethnicity and culture are often deeply problematic.

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ⁱ The term 'BME' is problematised and acknowledged as contested since it homogenizes people from a variety of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds and reproduces unequal power relations where White is not a visible marker of identity and is therefore a privileged identity. The use of this term only serves to perpetuate racial inequality by maintaining White ethnic identity as privileged, since 'White' is never named as an identity, it continues to be normative so that people of colour only exist in a marginalised position that is de-centred by Whiteness. The term BME is only used in this article in reference to statistical data to avoid confusion. Elsewhere the term 'people of colour' as used in the USA is preferred, because while it homogenises, it is inclusive to all non-White people and does not include 'minority' — a term that places non-Whites in a subordinate position to those racialized as White. The alternative term racialized minorities' is also used. While also a term that homogenises, it draws attention to the fact

that only non-Whites are racialized – and serves to highlight the discursive power of Whiteness. As such the term is a critique of Whiteness and therefore a form of resistance.