

# DEA Thinkpiece



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## The contributions of postcolonial theory to development education

*Vanessa Andreotti introduces the field of post-colonial theory and explores the potential contributions of this area to development education.*

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*'Theory without practice is idle, practice without theory is blind.'* (Ancient Chinese Proverb)

In this article I start with a contextualisation of development education (DE) (as I see it) and give a short presentation of what postcolonial theory (PC) is about. I then examine some implications of PC in terms of the agenda and critique of DE.

But before I start, it is important to mention that the terms North and South are used in this article strategically to facilitate understanding and the notion of 'critique' is not an attempt to expose errors but to engage with assumptions, contradictions and limitations in order to raise questions, promote dialogue and transform boundaries.

## DE context

From my perspective as someone perceived as a 'Southern' educator working in the UK, DE has a very distinctive focus. It is the only strand of education that organises itself around North-South relations and therefore is located right in the middle of local-global processes and debates. This location should force the field to attend to questions of power, politics, identity and culture – raising awareness and building skills to move the public beyond notions of the South based on compassion and charity (quoting DFID's statement), towards an understanding of interdependence. However, in order to promote education that encourages and enables people to think critically and to aspire towards a more just and sustainable world, it is extremely important that this understanding of interdependence recognises uneven levels of power (Dobson, 2005), as well as the connections between issues of culture (identities, representations, otherness, worth and value) and economics (distribution of wealth, access and labour).

On the other hand, it is important to recognise that DE is shaped by many factors. Organisations and practitioners have always found themselves struggling for time, funds and sometimes even audiences. As a result (and understandably), fundraising and the implementation of projects take up most (if not all) of practitioners' time. Thus, DE has mainly focused on practice – a 'how to' approach – at the expense of DE thinking – or theory.

There is a lack of internal critique in the field and of dialogue with other disciplines where debates about globalisation, identity and global politics and development are in full swing. The area is somewhat isolated and remains under-theorised (Huckle, 2002; Bourn, 2003; Davies, 2006; Andreotti, 2006). The debate in DE "remains at a superficial level precisely because there is little discussion of the theory implicit in the practice" (McCollum, 1996:22). Hence, dialogue with different disciplines and critical engagement can strengthen the basis of DE.

## Post-colonial theory

Post-colonial theory is the name given to a set of debates about North-South relations arising from various disciplines and 'movements':

- de-colonisation struggles and Southern responses and social movements challenging European domination (like those of Fanon, Freire and Gandhi)
- literary studies concerned with the representations of the 'First' and 'Third' worlds in literary and non-literary texts (like that of Edward Said) and
- recent debates in the fields of sociology, political theory, international relations and development and cultural studies triggered by new trends of discussion related to knowledge and power (e.g. Foucault, Derrida, Spivak and Bhabha).

PC is inter-disciplinary and provides links with practices of resistance: from grassroots struggles for independence to intellectual activism. However, as there are many strands within the field, PC is best described as a set of debates rather than a coherent theory as such. These debates interrogate North-South modes of thought, representations and power relations, as well as their effects on identities, social relations, politics and the distributions of labour and wealth in the world. According to Diana Brydon:

...postcolonial thinking challenges the failures of imagination that led to colonialism and its aftermath, a failure that continues with globalization, but is now assuming horrific new forms. Postcolonial work involves re-examining the past to see where things went wrong and where they might have been set right, abandoning Darwinian narratives of progress for an openness to learning from other ways, not to return to the ways of the past but to imagine better ways of living together in the future (Brydon, 2005 p.4).

In this sense it shares with DE the search for a new globalism that has an ethical relationship to 'difference' and that does not reproduce the universalistic and oppressive claims of cultural superiority that were the basis of colonialism. On the other hand, like any perspective, PC offers a situated account of reality that is partial and shaped by its context of production, therefore it is important to engage critically with what it proposes too.

In summary, the PC set of debates:

- problematises the representation of the Third World and issues of power, voice and cultural subordination/domination
- questions notions of development and visions of reality that are imposed as universal
- recognises the violence of colonialism and its effects, but also acknowledges its productive outcomes
- questions Eurocentrism, charity and 'benevolence'
- also questions issues of identity, belonging and representation, and the romanticisation of the South.

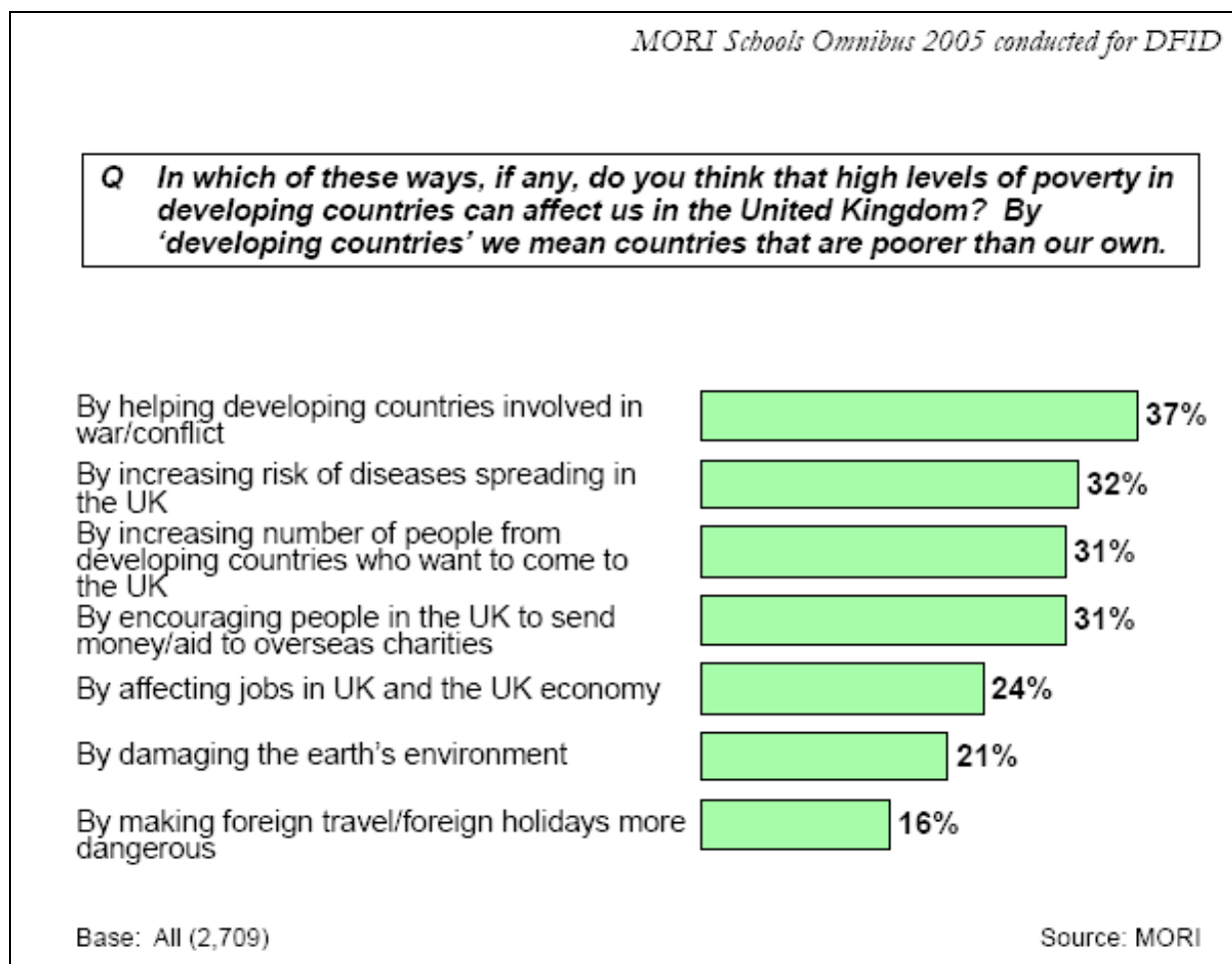
## PC and DE

PC focuses on the effects of colonialism on how people imagine themselves and the world. Therefore, it generates productive strategies and questions that can support the work of development educators in at least two important ways. First, it can provide triggers for critical engagement with perspectives and practices of DE itself. Second, it can provide an outline for an educational agenda that promotes a notion of citizenship that takes account of the cultural and material effects of uneven globalisation. I will illustrate the two dimensions separately.

### Triggers for critical engagement

A central concept in PC is the idea of ‘alterity’ – or the construction of identities and ‘otherness’. This construction of self and other, within PC, is always ‘relational’: we create who we are (our identities), by ‘creating’ who we are not (otherness). This notion has several implications for pedagogical and political processes in DE. The analysis of assumptions of figure 1 – taken from a DFID commission survey applied to schools - illustrates this point.

Figure 1



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From a PC perspective, the greatest danger of this survey is not the reproduction of misleading assumptions about 'poorer' (or Southern) people or the self-interested tone of the options, but the potential effects on the construction of the identities of the 'Northern' people who are answering the survey. The closed options available reinforce the idea that Northern people are inherently good and peaceful (i.e. they do not create a lot of pollution or spread diseases and that they are *entitled* to a safe holiday abroad) and that they can only affect 'poorer' people in positive ways and be affected by them in negative ways. This can create a notion that the South is or has a problem and the North is or has the solution to this problem and this is the basis of 'cultural supremacy'.

Cultural supremacy is the projection of one's own values as superior to those of others. It is connected to the European Enlightenment and the justifications for colonisation. In this sense, it refers to the projection of a local (European) epistemology as universal, unmarked and neutral, which resulted in the creation of 'myths of modernity', which dictate that the modern civilisation is the most developed culture and has an obligation to civilise, uplift, educate and develop the lesser (barbarian) cultures (Mignolo, 2000). The notion of cultural supremacy has numerous effects on relationships, the worth attributed to individuals, knowledge and power, the distribution of resources and wealth, and ideas about the origins of the problems, responsibilities and the ways to go about solving them.

A very common effect of cultural supremacy in the context of DE is the drive for a 'civilising mission' of the North 'educating' the South in an attempt to solve their problems – to 'sort them out'. This strategy is often linked to the idea of 'making a difference out there' and conflated with global citizenship in some mainstream educational practices that are often categorised as DE (e.g. school links and fund-raising campaigns). The assumption behind this drive is that the 'problem' of developing countries is only based on a 'lack' of attributes that the North possesses (e.g. education, democracy, scientific knowledge, technology, a more civilised culture, history, universally 'correct' values, etc...) and that the North is responsible for the South in the same way that it was believed that the white men had the *burden* of civilising non-white peoples in colonial times.

In the same way that, in the period of colonisation, a local (European) set of assumptions of reality and of European supremacy was violently imposed on other people as universal (Bhabha 1994, Mignolo 2000, Biccum 2002), from a PC perspective it can be argued that Northern people (those who can and do act globally) may become 'global citizens' by projecting their local (interests, desires and ideas of reality and knowledge) as everyone else's global (Dobson, 2005), repeating the epistemic violence of colonialism.

Cultural supremacy is based on the premise that one has achieved a better, more developed or universal way of seeing and being and prompts patronising and paternalistic attitudes towards the South and Southern peoples, as well as a foreclosure - or necessary denial - of the colonial past and of causal responsibility or obligations towards the South. This 'foreclosure' is related to the idea that, in our uneven 'interdependence', the North is also part of the problem. Without this understanding the argument for global citizenship is left to rest on notions of compassion,

charity or a notion of 'common humanity' or 'interdependence' that do not necessarily address issues of power, inequalities and injustice, as a notion of seamless linear progress and development is adopted and 'Northern' ways of seeing, being and doing are projected the yardstick for the measurement of all humanity (Shiva, 2004). These are central issues both for DE and for post-colonial theory.

Another potential contribution of PC, arising from the concept of alterity is related to the notion of difference and diversity – and the debate around Southern Voices in DE. As we develop our notions of self in relation to others, our identities are always and already contaminated by difference and therefore 'hybrid'. Thus, PC problematises representation and essentialism, which is the idea that groups/ethnicities have one or several defining features that are natural and exclusive to all members of that group/ethnicity. PC addresses the risks of homogenisation, oversimplified categorisations of oppressor/oppressed (and their inversions), romanticisations of the South and 'identity politics' (that can be power-seeking and excluding).

In relation to essentialism and representation, PC prompts questions that can be useful to clear the space for dialogue in the DE debate on Southern Voices, such as:

- If Southern (and Northern) nations are extremely complex and heterogeneous – whose perspective 'represents' the nation or specific ethnic groups?
- What do people expect to hear when they are listening to 'the South' or to 'the oppressed'?
- Can the oppressed really say something from a space outside that in which they were constructed as 'oppressed' and given a voice?
- If given a voice, is the oppressed still 'oppressed' and who can (s)he represent then?
- What are the origins and implications of the desire to listen to a transparent, authentic and heroic representative of the South?
- How should we relate to these perspectives (as educators in educational processes and as citizens in political processes)?

As far as risks are concerned, PC may help us examine the dangers of speaking from a Southern position, such as the romanticisation of national values (that may conceal internal racism), the commodification of difference - when 'culture' is packed and sold to a niche market (and may end up reinforcing stereotypes and racism) and of a new ethnocentrism (i.e. belief in the superiority of one's ethnic group) that may reproduce a notion of 'us versus them', where us is associated with non-white/good people and them with white/bad people. A significant risk in Northern contexts is that this may end up 'rewarding those who are already privileged or upwardly mobile' (Kapoor, 2004 p.631) at the expense of those who are not.

At the same time there is a clear recognition within PC that the solidarity of the North in the struggle for justice only makes sense in partnership and close connection with the South. So speaking as a 'Third World Person' becomes an important position for political mobilisation in many contexts today, especially where Eurocentrism prevails - but it becomes problematic when it happens to 'tick the box of diversity'. As Spivak suggests,

...the question 'Who should speak?' is less crucial than 'Who will listen?' (...) the real demand is that, when I speak from that position, I should be listened to seriously; not with that kind of benevolent imperialism, really, which simply says that because that I happen to be an Indian or whatever... A hundred years ago it was impossible for me to speak, for the precise reason that it makes it only too possible for me to speak in certain circles now (Spivak, 1990 p.59-60).

The major implication of this analysis for DE is that listening seriously and respectfully to Southern voices implies critical engagement on the part of non-Southern people with the *individual* perspectives presented - and not the passive acceptance of what is said by the Southern person as an expression of what the 'oppressed' continent, nation or ethnic group 'thinks'. Here, an attitude of benevolence or fear to engage only obstructs real dialogue. On the other hand, a respectful engagement also implies a previous change of thinking and attitude in relation to the South that requires a change 'at home' and within. This change is precisely what PC introduces as an educational agenda in the context of DE.

## An educational agenda

In PC thinking, an ethical relation with the South demands critical literacy, 'unlearning privilege', learning to learn from below, and learning to live with uncertainty. Critical literacy is an educational practice that connects language, power and knowledge. Critical literacy can transform relationships and promote more ethical and accountable reasoning and action as it encourages educators/learners to engage critically with multiple perspectives, asking questions like:

- What are the assumptions (about knowledge and reality) informing this perspective (on a specific issue)?
- According to this perspective, who decides what is real or ideal? In whose name? And for whose benefit?
- What are the implications of this worldview (in terms of social relations, power, ethics, economics, the environment, etc.)?
- How could this issue be imagined 'otherwise'?
- How was my own perspective constructed?
- What are the blind spots (foreclosures) in my own way of thinking?

Kapoor (2004) defines 'unlearning privilege' as the ability to,

...retrace the itinerary of our prejudices and learning habits (from racism, sexism and classism to academic elitism and ethnocentrism), stop thinking of ourselves as better or fitter [and refrain from] always wanting to correct, teach, theorise, develop, colonise, appropriate, use, record, inscribe, enlighten (p. 641).

Learning to learn from below is,

...a suspension of belief that one is indispensable, better or culturally superior; it is refraining from thinking that the Third World is in trouble and that one has the solutions; it is resisting the temptation of projecting oneself or one's world onto the Other (Spivak, 2002 p.6 cited in Kapoor, 2004 p.642).

Learning to live with uncertainty refers to an openness to different and unpredictable outcomes that may emerge if one lets go of the will to always have power and control over interactions, encounters processes and spaces.

This implies that, in learning about or representing the other 'over there', careful scrutiny is needed 'over here' (ibid). Within PC thinking, the North does have a responsibility in relation to the South, but it is a 'causal' responsibility - as answerability towards the South (Spivak, 2004) - rather than responsibility for the South (as the burden of the fittest). This involves accountability for the effects of 'Northern' cultural and material violences. It demands a revision of ways of seeing and relating that have been conditioned by a colonial history and by asymmetrical globalisation. This asymmetry creates a situation in which not only benefits are unequally distributed, but 'the very possibility of 'being global' is unbalanced' (Dobson, 2005 p.259).

## Conclusion

My own interpretation of PC's assumptions in relation to the DE agenda is that DE needs to create spaces and provide analytical tools and ethical grounds for learners to engage with global issues and perspectives addressing complexity, uncertainty, contingency and difference. In practice, compared to an educational framework based on compassion and seamless development, PC outlines an approach that attempts to go beyond ethnocentrism, essentialism, reversed racism and orientalism (as illustrated in table 1 in very general terms).

Table 1: A 'compassion' versus a postcolonial educational project

	<b>A compassion/seamless progress framework</b>	<b>A postcolonial framework</b>
<b>Problem</b>	Poverty, helplessness	Inequality, injustice
<b>Nature of the problem</b>	Lack of 'development', education, resources, skills, culture, technology, etc.	Complex structures, systems, assumptions, power relations and attitudes that create and maintain exploitation and enforced disempowerment and tend to eliminate difference



<b>Justification for positions of privilege (in the North and in the South)</b>	'Development', 'history', education, harder work, better organisation, better use of resources, technology	Benefit from and control over unjust and violent systems and structures
<b>Basis for caring</b>	Common humanity/being good/sharing and caring  Responsibility <i>FOR</i> the other (or <i>to teach</i> the other)	Justice/complicity in harm  Responsibility <i>TOWARDS</i> the other (or <i>to learn with</i> the other) - accountability
<b>Grounds for acting</b>	Humanitarian/moral (based on normative principles for thought and action)	Political/ethical (based on normative principles for relationships)
<b>Understanding of interdependence</b>	We are all equally interconnected, we all want the same thing, we can all do the same thing	Asymmetrical globalisation, unequal power relations, Northern and Southern elites imposing own assumptions as universal
<b>What needs to change</b>	Structures, institutions and individuals that are a barrier to development	Structures, (belief) systems, institutions, cultures, individuals, relationships
<b>What for</b>	So that everyone achieves development, harmony, tolerance and equality	So that injustices are addressed, more equal grounds for dialogue and power are created
<b>What individuals can do</b>	Support campaigns to change structures, donate time, expertise and resources	Analyse own position/context and participate in changing structures, assumptions, identities, attitudes and power relations in their contexts

<b>Basic principle for change</b>	Universalism (non-negotiable vision of how everyone should live, what everyone should want or should be)	Reflexivity, dialogue, contingency and an ethical relation to difference
<b>Goal of global citizenship education</b>	Empower individuals to act (or become active citizens) according to what has been defined for them as a good life or ideal world	Empower individuals: to reflect critically on the legacies and processes of their cultures and contexts, to imagine different futures and to take responsibility for their decisions and actions
<b>Strategies for the global dimension in education</b>	Raising awareness of global issues and promoting campaigns	Promoting engagement with global issues and perspectives and an ethical relationship to difference, addressing complexity and power relations
<b>Potential benefits of the approach</b>	Greater awareness of some of the problems, support for campaigns, greater motivation to help/do something, feel good factor	Independent/critical thinking and more informed, responsible and ethical action
<b>Potential problems of the approach</b>	Feeling of self-importance or self-righteousness and/or cultural supremacy, reinforcement of colonial assumptions and relations, reinforcement of privilege, partial alienation, uncritical action	Guilt, internal conflict and paralysis, critical disengagement, feeling of helplessness

Source: Andreotti, 2006a: 96-97

PC questions and ideas have inspired two research based collaborative international educational initiatives that I am involved with: the Open Spaces for Dialogue and Enquiry (OSDE) and Through Other Eyes (TOE). OSDE focuses on the development of critical literacy and independent thinking through the introduction of global issues and perspectives in educational contexts, including primary, secondary, higher and teacher education. The project website ([www.osdemethodology.org.uk](http://www.osdemethodology.org.uk)) offers a methodology for the creation of safe spaces

for enquiry, guidelines for facilitation, and 'copyleft' resources for teacher education and secondary schools. Within OSDE, the role of development education is to enable learners

- to engage with complex local/global processes and diverse perspectives
- to examine the origins and implications of their own and other people's assumptions
- to negotiate change, to transform relationships, to think independently and to make responsible and conscious choices about their own lives and how they affect the lives of others
- to live with and learn from difference and conflict and to prevent conflict from escalating to aggression and violence
- to establish ethical, responsible and caring relationships within and beyond their identity groups (Andreotti et al, 2006b).

The project Through Other Eyes (TOE) aims to develop an online teacher education course around 'indigenous' understandings of the development agenda. The objective of this course is to build transnational and critical literacies by supporting teachers and teacher trainees in England:

- To develop an understanding of how language and systems of belief, values and representation affect the way people interpret the world
- To identify how different groups understand issues related to development and their implications for the development agenda
- To critically examine these interpretations - both 'mainstream' and indigenous - looking at origins and potential implications of assumptions
- To identify an ethics for improved dialogue, engagement and mutual learning
- To transfer the methodology developed in the programme into the classroom context through the analysis and piloting of sample classroom materials (using creative arts and other strategies)

The conceptual framework of this project is based on 4 dimensions which were partly based on Gayatri Spivak's ideas of 'unlearning': 1. learning to unlearn; 2. learning to listen; 3. learning to learn and 4. learning to reach out (or engage with the other). This project is still in its 'piloting phase', but draft resources can be found at [www.throughothereyes.org.uk](http://www.throughothereyes.org.uk).

In conclusion, postcolonial theory provides directions that point to a move beyond ethnocentrism and its claims of cultural supremacy, towards 'planetary citizenship' (Spivak, 2003) based on a deep understanding of interdependence (in 'material' and cultural terms) and causal responsibility towards the South. It offers both an outline for an educational agenda and powerful and necessary triggers for an internal critique of DE. The challenge now is to check if DE (with its multiple contexts and constraints) can create spaces where we, as development educators and our audiences, can make our choices in an informed way and take responsibility for the implications of our decisions.

\* As an accessible starting point for people who are not familiar with PC and its language, I recommend: *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction* by Robert Young (OUP).

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