

## Decolonize Your Syllabus

by Amina Saidou and Peter Eubanks

Much has been written in recent years about the importance of “decolonizing” the syllabus in higher education, especially after the publication of Dr. Yvette DeChavez’s [important piece in the Los Angeles Times in 2018](#). Her op-ed sparked the popular #decolonizeyoursyllabus on Twitter (now X) and led to multiple articles, workshops, and other teaching tools (such as [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)). It even [inspired a line of t-shirts](#).

Some have questioned the use of the term “decolonizing” in this context by arguing that it can be used as a sloppy buzzword that ultimately trivializes the important work of centering BIPOC voices and experiences (see our colleague Emily O. Gravett’s [piece](#) on this). While we share these legitimate concerns, in keeping with DeChavez’s [insistence on the word "decolonize"](#) and in consideration of the particular circumstances that we would like to highlight for this Teaching Toolbox, we will use the term to describe Amina’s recent experiences with one of the required courses for the French major at JMU, FR 308: Contemporary History and Culture in the Francophone World. We hope that this description of her efforts to decolonize this course and its syllabus can serve as a brief case study for any faculty member wishing similarly to decolonize a course or curriculum.

Prior to Amina’s joining the JMU French program in Fall 2022, this course was titled “Contemporary French History and Culture” and was taught for ten years by Peter. While this course focused on the history and culture of France since World War I and thus naturally included discussions of immigration, race, and colonialism, the standard textbooks available for this course often centered perspectives and voices that were white, male, and Western. The course was renamed to reflect better the richness and diversity of French speakers throughout the world and Amina’s background as a Fulbright scholar from Niger with expertise in feminist Francophone literature and cinema positioned her perfectly for revamping this course.

What follows is a brief description of **FIVE** considerations that Amina made when decolonizing FR 308, shifting it from a disproportionately white-, male-, and Western-centered approach to one that is more inclusive of the wide range of voices and perspectives represented in the French-speaking world. She offers these as a kind of mini-case study of principles that can apply broadly in courses and curricula throughout the colleges, department, and programs at JMU:

**Cross-reading perspective:** The reading and critical evaluation of various sources, beneficial for comparing different points of view, contribute to diverse and well-informed opinions on a subject. In my efforts to decolonize my FR 308 course, I advocate for an inclusive exploration of Francophone history and cultures, considering the profound impact of France's widespread cultural influence overseas as well as these countries’ influence on France, shaped by a legacy of conquests, colonization, and different immigration waves. To truly grasp the essence of French civilization, one must venture beyond the confines of Europe, exploring the intricate tapestry of its relationships with other nations. The 20th and 21st centuries witness the emergence of a new cultural identity in France, blending the North and West African cultures as well as cultures of Asia.

*The Take-Away: A decolonized syllabus or curriculum incorporates a "[cross-reading](#)" perspective, advocating for reading from a variety of sources across historical backgrounds and geo-cultural realities.*

**A wide spectrum of contemporary French-speaking scholars:** My syllabus and class lectures incorporate works by scholars from various fields including perspectives on gender, social class, race, and majority and minority demographics, among other considerations. To showcase the wide scope of contemporary history and cultures in the Francophone world, I draw on works from philosophers, sociologists, and pedagogues. Also, works by French writers and filmmakers from immigrant backgrounds, as well as naturalized French-speaking writers from minority or marginalized groups offer their perceptions of French and Francophone cultures today.

*The Take-Away: A decolonized syllabus or curriculum draws from a wide spectrum along cultural, socioeconomic, philosophical, scientific, and other lines to ensure a diversity of genres, disciplines, and approaches.*

**Choice of materials:** The choice of materials is crucial for efficiently broadening and satisfying our students' perspectives in terms of genre, environment, gender, and viewpoints. My understanding is that teaching by the book (using only one teaching material as opposed to providing various sources) is insufficient to encourage students to think critically and collaborate about contemporary history and culture in the Francophone world. I incorporate real-life experiences from our current and daily lives such as news-feeds, videos, interviews, personal experiences, and students' perspectives. These open-access educational resources, with their diverse options, provide the advantages of both low and no-cost materials.

*The Take-Away: Consider varying the materials used in course curricula, to avoid the single textbook approach, and especially consider various open-source materials, which make college [more affordable](#) (excellent JMU resources related to using or developing open-access materials may be found [here](#)).*

**Factual sources:** I expose my students to actual learning sources, including events, people, and media releases occurring in our contemporary time. My syllabus features work such as documentaries, podcasts, films, and video interviews, providing valuable insights into the French and Francophone cultures beyond dominant Western and colonial narratives.

*The Take-Away: Expose students to contemporary resources and platforms, some operating in real-time, to present them with perspectives from outside dominant narratives.*

**[Decolonized Language:](#)** Last, but not least, in decolonizing the course, I provide documents or materials from various regional languages or dialects in France as well as French-based creole languages spoken in France, the USA, Africa, and the Caribbean. We explore the heuristic, imaginative, and representational functions of the French language, offering broadened knowledge beyond white, male, and Western-centered perspectives and voices.

*The Take-Away: Decentering resources produced in one particular language by drawing on resources from many languages and dialects helps to decolonize the syllabus and reveal the ways in which knowledge production is affected by the interplay between colonizing and colonized languages and cultures.*

By decolonizing our syllabi in these ways, we ensure that our students are exposed to a fuller spectrum of viewpoints and also help all of our students to see themselves represented in the materials and approaches encountered in the classroom. We pursue the inclusive excellence [that is inseparable from our dedication to academic excellence at JMU](#).

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