



Can education heal? Staff and students exploring reparative pedagogies in the context of institutional harms in higher education

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Abstract

In 2021, University College London (UCL) published its report following a eugenics inquiry three years before (UCL, 2021). What was interesting about this report was the inclusion of education-related recommendations, signalling a recognition that reckoning with legacies of harm meant going beyond apology towards intentionally confronting the educational implications of post-inquiry work. Reckoning with historic and contemporary harms in educational contexts is under-theorised in learning development literature. Situating our analysis within what Zembylas (2015) and others have called the 'affective turn', we follow Sriprakash's (2023) theorising of the reparative functions of education exploring the ways that reparative pedagogies can be harnessed, particularly by those higher education institutions that have acknowledged histories and legacies of harm.

We critically reflect on the 'doing' of learning development work across the university to explore the ways that teaching activities can incorporate reparative pedagogies. Drawing on three illustrative examples, we explain the development of activities designed to be integrated into existing curriculum content, and report on staff and student engagement

with these activities. Utilising reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2023) with data generated from semi-structured interviews with students, reflective interviews with staff, observation of teaching, and our own reflective field notes, we reflect on the extent to which our activities promoted awareness of eugenics at the university, developed student engagement with institutional histories of harm, and highlighted the ongoing tensions and dilemmas of this legacy for a 'future focused' (UCL, 2021) curriculum and student experience.

Keywords: ableism; culturally sensitive teaching; eugenics; pedagogy; pedagogy of care; reparative pedagogy.

Introduction

Reckoning with harm in education contexts is under-theorised in learning development literature. Reticence to conceptualise the ways in which academic work can heal has obscured productive thinking about caring and compassionate pedagogies in higher education classrooms (Love, 2019; Yarrow and Johnston, 2023; Burton and Bowman, 2022). Situating our analysis within what (Zembylas, 2015) and others have called the 'affective turn' in education, we follow (Sriprakash, 2023) theorising of the reparative functions of education and explore the ways that reparative pedagogies can be harnessed and developed, particularly by those institutions that have acknowledged histories and legacies of harm. The concept of reparative pedagogies draws on an expansive and non-instrumental understanding of educators' work, and understood this way, reparative pedagogies become a form of reparation beyond the material and epistemic. As Paulson (2023) argues, these approaches can encompass engagement with imagining and creating institutional futures where multiplicity, truth-telling, care, and accountability are prioritised as educational issues. Our work builds on that of other colleagues who have looked at University College London's eugenics legacy such as Brewis and Hannan (2023) and Das (2024) who have highlighted the need to reckon with this legacy educationally. They have paved the way for us to work collaboratively with educators within the institution to think about how we incorporate reparative pedagogies to promote a careful approach to developing teaching content based on the university's legacy.

In this paper, we will describe and critically reflect on the 'doing' of learning development work across university faculties to explore the ways that teaching and learning can incorporate reparative pedagogies to support explicit recognition of and careful engagement with eugenics histories and legacies.

Our engagement in co-produced learning development work (Knowler et al., 2023) in the context of historical institutional harms will also enable us to think further about frameworks for staff and student collaboration when working together on difficult or sensitive knowledge (Britzman, 1998) and we argue for the use of care-based approaches as essential. In reviewing the role of staff and student partnership in reparative approaches to learning development work and the ways that questions of inclusion and belonging can be addressed in this analysis, we aim to contribute to the developing literature on pedagogies of care as a crucial concern for higher education, now and in the future.

When it was discovered in 2018 that since 2015 a 'London Conference on Intelligence' was hosted at UCL and was attended by participants that clearly used eugenics and eugenics-related ideas in their current research, students rightly demanded to know what UCL intended to do about this. In 2018, UCL investigated the history and legacy of eugenics within the institution. Francis Galton, often described as the 'father' of eugenics was a champion and benefactor to the newly established Galton Laboratory in 1904. Following his death in 1911, he bequeathed £40,000 to the University of London (his entire residual estate) to establish the Galton Chair of Eugenics at UCL and expressed a wish that Karl Pearson should take this role.

Our work is premised on the assumption that learning developers have a significant role in supporting their teaching colleagues to not only be aware of problematic histories and legacies, but to consider the ways in which appropriate curriculum organisation and socially just pedagogies can address, and even redress institutional harms caused by historical violence. Drawing on our team's experience of working on ELEP, we aim to provoke thinking and reflection about the opportunities and challenges that such sensitive and complex work can generate.

In the first section of the paper, we explore the challenges of teaching difficult and/or sensitive topics like eugenics in higher education classrooms. We consider the relationship between education and social justice and the 'equity detours' (Gorski, 2019, n.p.) that can

emerge when working with colleagues and asking them to incorporate problematic histories and legacies. We then offer three examples that outline our approach to working as a team and supporting colleagues to incorporate eugenics histories and legacies into their modules. We reflect upon the ways learning development can further educators' capacities to develop pedagogies of care situated within social justice frameworks whilst having to navigate increasingly harmful neoliberal contexts for their work. We conclude by arguing that while working with colleagues on 'difficult' or 'problematic' legacies is complex and mired with potential pitfalls, it is essential if socially just education futures are to be realised by universities over the coming decades.

Can education heal?

The extent to which education can be a 'healing' activity has been broadly established in literature that focuses on the affective dimensions of teaching and learning (Espina-Varona, 2018). While this is a relatively recent development over the last twenty years (Zembylas, 2015), the acknowledgement that classrooms are busy, complex and dynamic spaces where cognitive, affective and embodied aspects of learning should be attended to in higher education classrooms has been challenging to achieve, in the light of marketised and neoliberalised higher education policies in England. The complementary nature of education to support learners who have experienced trauma brought on by displacement, violence or mental health conditions was recognised by the United Nations Scientific, Educational and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) (2019) highlighting the ways social and emotional aspects of learning can support feelings of safety and therefore promote wellbeing. However, in the context of teaching areas that are complex or sensitive, such as histories of genocide, histories of warfare, sexual violence, and natural disasters, or where an institution is trying to teach about institutional histories of harm, there is a strong argument that the teaching of 'facts' alone as a linear and unproblematic unfolding of events can risk unintended consequences in the classroom. One somewhat unrealistic strategy is, of course, to try and ensure affective and emotional dimensions do not enter the classroom. Richardson (2021), reflecting on teaching the Holocaust to student teachers, goes further and draws attention to strong emotions in the classroom. She also emphasises that educators often experience the weight of emotional labour when trying to teach in ways that are care-based and authentic. However, as Gravett and Lygo-Baker (2024) demonstrate, incorporating affective practices, such as developing pedagogies

based on care and compassion, can be an antidote to anxiety, competition, and exclusion in the classroom and help learning developers to support educators' 'affective craft'.

Learning developers have an important role in supporting transformative learning and care-based pedagogies. However, this would involve working with colleagues to navigate relationships and emotional engagement with curriculum material in ways they might not have done before. Educators' willingness to intentionally work with complex or sensitive topics and to hold the affective and emotional dynamics this creates, we would argue is one step towards seeing the classroom as a reparative space (Sriprakash, 2023). The acknowledgement of harm done and an intention to address these harms through teaching and learning activities can be a powerful experience for learners and can begin the process of an institutional reckoning (Punzi and Steele, 2024). A further tension for learning developers' work is in supporting colleagues to include complex or sensitive curriculum content and develop reparative pedagogies, which relates to the challenges involved in what constitutes these aspects in practice and the need to do this work with extreme care even within this conceptual uncertainty.

Developing reparative pedagogies – three examples

We argue the complexity of higher education classrooms makes it difficult to identify and isolate single strategies or tools that increase practitioners' capabilities for teaching difficult and/or sensitive topics. For this reason, we were keen to utilise an approach to our work that would capture complexity, entanglements and hold onto the inherently 'messy' world of the classroom. In September 2022, we began to map modules across the university that contained, or could potentially contain, curriculum content related to eugenics or anti-eugenics topics. As part of this process, we contacted module leads to discuss their teaching and to listen to their experiences of working with the university's eugenics histories and legacies. We met with interested module leaders and proposed small-scale projects that would focus on developing curriculum materials that could be incorporated into existing modules. This process had a pragmatic dimension since UCL is a very large university and it would never be possible to observe and engage with all relevant modules over the three-year project. Table 1 below outlines the three modules we are reporting on in this paper and our data sources as we reflect on our work with colleagues.

Table 1. Overview of illustrative examples.

Discipline	Focus	Data Sources
Example 1: Geography	Linking the teaching of statistical methods to eugenics histories and legacies at UCL. Using small-scale changes to module materials and classroom activities.	Team field notes. Session observations. Student feedback in reflective interviews. Tutor feedback in reflective interviews. Team reflective dialogue as part of team meetings.
Example 2: Archaeology	Incorporating seminar activities that address harmful legacies, including UCL's history of eugenics and the naming of museums.	
Example 3: Education	Developing a session that addresses UCL's history and legacy of eugenics in the context of disability studies, and to critically consider culturally sensitive approaches to teaching the eugenics legacy.	

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were a crucial part of our planning in thinking about working with university tutors, as well as formally applying for ethical approval via the university review committee. Since we were interested in the ways educators and learning developers work together to implement teaching and learning activities about harm, it was vital our work did not inadvertently cause harm. This was a risk because it can be easy to overlook ethical tensions in teaching and learning seeing them as part of the 'everyday' work of educators. We took the view that, while it could be argued much of the focus of our project was on the 'everyday' aspects of teaching, we saw the intentional inclusion of difficult and/or sensitive materials as an ethical concern. This was in addition to asking tutors to change or adapt some of their practices under the scrutiny of the team which could cause discomfort or stress. Our first step was to ensure tutors were very clear about what was expected of them. We met to agree timelines and milestones for each set of activities per module and the project manager took responsibility for allocating the necessary time to do the work. Related to this, the project manager played an important role in ensuring the work was scalable and realistic given the very busy time of year our work took place.

Once the project processes were agreed, we ensured that project information sheets outlined the aims, expected outcomes, and ethical considerations, and that these were circulated to tutors and students before any work took place. We intentionally built in time with tutors to discuss the risk of introducing new content into the module that was difficult

and/or sensitive and ensured that information was communicated to students via the university's virtual learning environment. We set up signposting and sources of support for tutors and students both before and after the sessions, and we checked in with tutors a few weeks after teaching sessions to reflect and to ensure they could discuss any concerns with our team in confidence. Both the project lead and project manager were active in supporting doctoral researchers as they collated data and we set up a Microsoft (MS) Teams site to share information, check in informally, and share resources. The project received approval from the university's ethics committee reference: 27009/001.

Practice examples

Teaching sensitive topics often requires a meticulous and thoughtful approach to planning teaching activities – examples of such topics include evolution, discrimination, colonialism, and genocide, all of which necessitate sensitivity and a deep understanding of their complex and emotional nature. For example, Reiss (2019) suggests evolution should be viewed as a sensitive topic rather than a controversial one, emphasising the need for it to be taught with careful consideration. He argues that while evolution may challenge certain personal beliefs, it is a well-established scientific theory. Therefore, educators should approach the subject with sensitivity, acknowledging students' diverse backgrounds and perspectives, and providing a respectful and supportive learning environment. From this standpoint, by acknowledging the complex and emotional nature of eugenics, particularly its legacy at the university, we were keen to use inclusive and culturally relevant pedagogies that respected diverse perspectives and fostered critical understanding among students.

What follows are three examples from our project designed to prompt thinking, discussion, and reflection about the ways we attempted to incorporate reparative pedagogies into existing module content. An important practice for our team was to ensure that we worked closely with module tutors to develop content that was relevant to their module. This was important so they felt they had agency to develop and adapt our suggested amendments. This also provided an ethos of discussion, critique and reflection where we could 'stretch' modules tutors' comfort zones. The examples that follow have been written so as not to identify specific modules, tutors, or students but so that we can demonstrate the learning and reflection that came from our collaborative development activities.

Example 1 (Geography). Less is more: developing a research methods module to make links to the university's eugenics legacy

The aim in this example was to begin to explore the relationship between histories of quantitative methods, ethics, and the misuse of numbers leading to the misrepresentation of research findings in Geography. The university played an important role in the early development of statistical methods and this legacy is both significant and contentious. In conversations between the module leader and the team, it was agreed as important to raise awareness among students to understand the university's role in the history of statistics and to offer opportunities to critically engage with the ways eugenics legacies appear and are presented using statistics. We agreed activities would address the following questions:

- What is eugenics?
- What is the university's role in the development of eugenics?
- What is the relationship between ethics, eugenics, and the university?
- How is the university confronting and addressing its history of eugenics?

The team worked with the module lead to review the existing module and look for relevant places to include new content where content is most related to relationships and correlation between variables. Once we had an agreement on what and where changes could be made, we prepared changes for three of the ten sessions and devised a pre-module introduction on the virtual learning environment.

Underpinning our thinking in relation to these changes was a desire to develop students' knowledge and understanding of the relationship between the histories of the development of quantitative methods and ethical considerations. Instead, we wanted to avoid 'list' teaching of facts about eugenicists which could be upsetting or uncomfortable and instead took a more careful and holding approach to deliver difficult and sensitive content about the misuse of statistics and eugenics ideologies. To ensure this work had a reparative element, it was also important that students could critically assess future-focused implications of examining the relationship between the histories of the development of quantitative methods and modern developments in the use of these methods. This was a vital aspect of these activities because key figures in history, such as Galton and Pearson, developed many of the early versions of these methods and were also active supporters of

eugenics. Enabling continuity, and in rejecting an ahistorical approach whereby eugenics is a thing of the past, we wanted to support students to reflect on their own relationships to this troubling past and to think about the implications for their own futures as researchers, educators, or something else. We introduced objects from the Galton Collection to demonstrate how the development of statistical tools could be used in ways to denigrate marginalised groups, such as Galton's gloves, used to devise a 'beauty map of Britain' (see Das, 2021).

We designed an open-ended discussion activity so students could explore and challenge ideas introduced in a supportive way. We did this by giving students a set of images related to past, present, and future eugenics (Figures 1-3), with a commentary on the back of the images. They were encouraged by the tutor to ask questions, make connections, and listen to the perspectives of others. In this sense, our reparative focus was not to assume some chronological distance from the events covered in previous sessions but to intentionally complexify issues of legacy. The card activity was also intended to enable students to bring their own histories and experiences of eugenics ideologies, even if they did not necessarily describe it as such and to change the dynamic between tutor and students so that students understood their perspectives were valued and important in the session.

Figure 1. Tableau Synoptique des Traits Physionomiques (Synoptic Table of Physiognomic Traits), a facial measurement chart for the Parisian police department, ca. 1909. (Bertillon, 1909)



Figure 2. Specimens of composite portraiture (Galton, 1883).

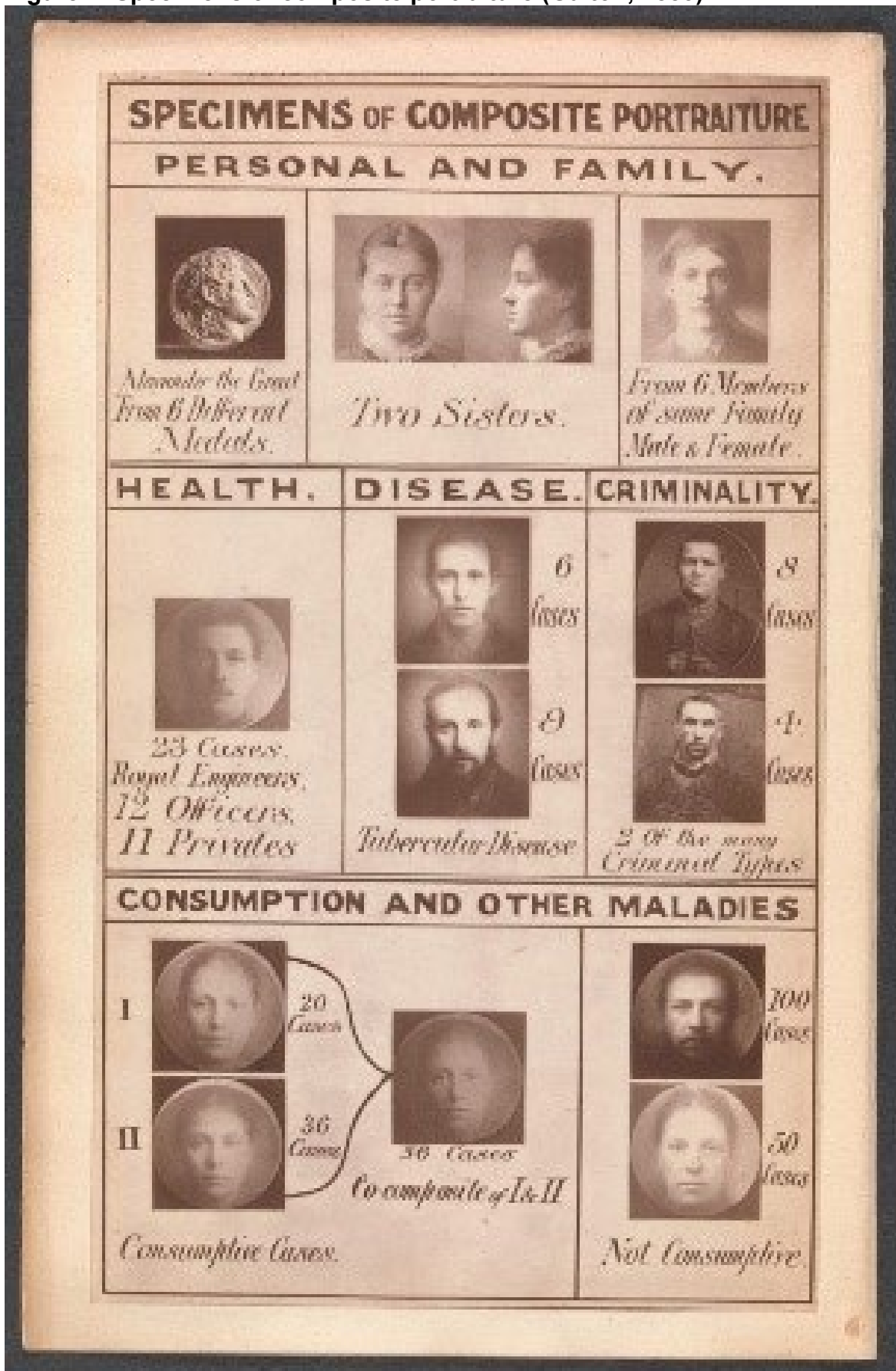
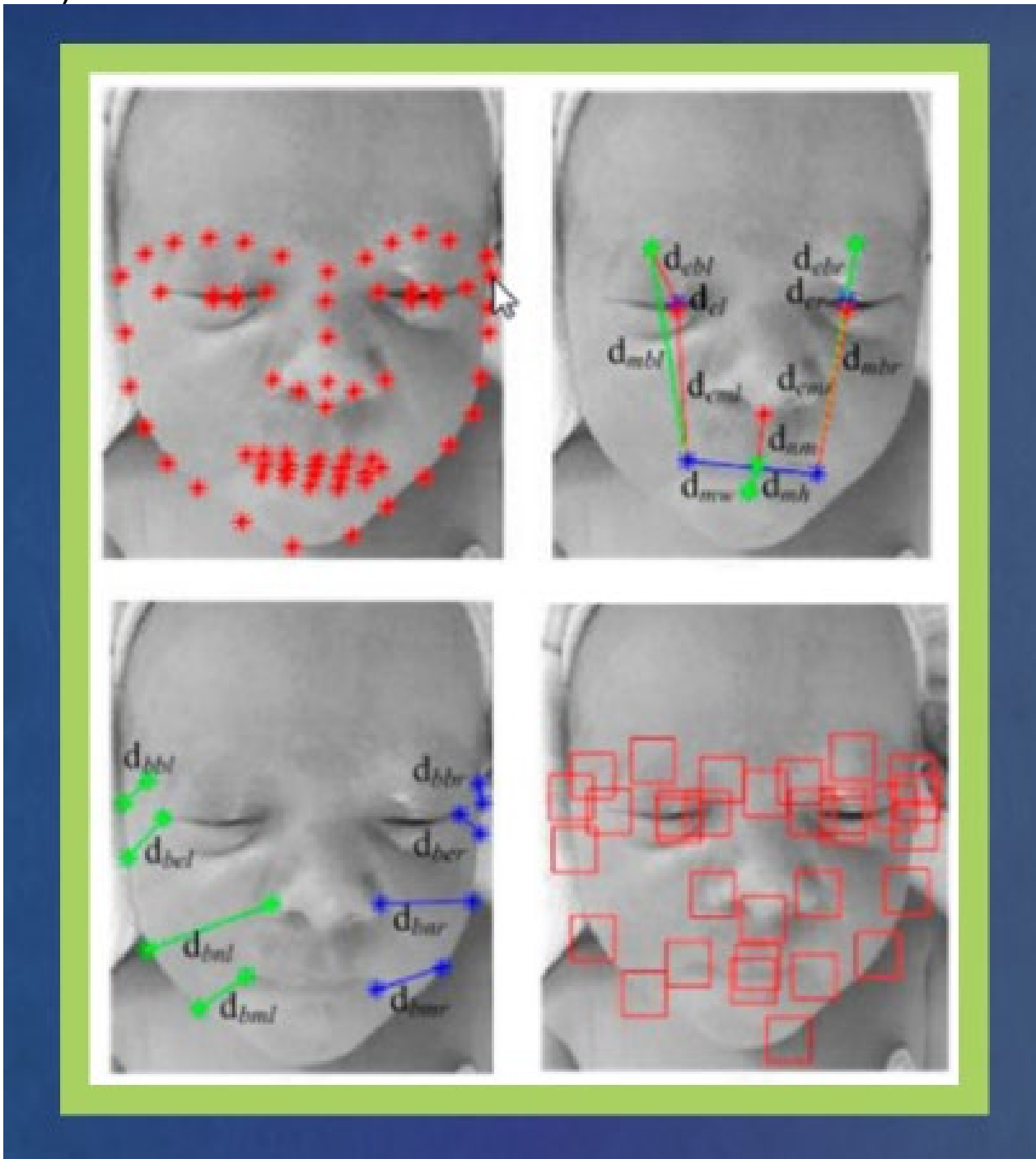


Figure 3. Computer vision program determines the pain level of infants (Zhi et al., 2018).



Example 2 (Archaeology). Developing seminar work to promote student engagement with the university’s eugenics legacy

Our focus in this example related to ways of enhancing student engagement in seminar activities following a lecture that addressed controversial or contested topics. Working with the module tutor, the emphasis was to support students’ abilities to work collaboratively in teams, both face-to-face and remotely; to model and support critical thinking; to listen to

others and provide constructive feedback; and to promote deep learning from retrieving and integrating information based on given tasks. While students may have a lot of experience doing this, whether this experience would be enough to support engagement with difficult topics, like eugenics, was of interest to us. From a learning development perspective, we recognised the importance of group work in promoting collaborative learning but were interested to learn more about the role of these types of activities when addressing a contentious or sensitive issue.

As a team, we were keen to establish good practice principles for setting up and managing group work when teaching sensitive topics. In a similar vein to the first example, the project team met with the module lead to listen carefully to the tensions, challenges, and opportunities she faced teaching a module that covered differing topics each week that would usually be linked to potentially sensitive topics like museum ethics, decolonising collections, and working with human remains. Our key strategy was to use activities that not only afforded variety in student grouping for diverse views and experiences to be shared but also could be interactive yet contained within the session (Pace, 2022), reducing the amount of pre-session preparation for students. We researched and pitched a range of active learning techniques to the module lead to ensure the activities were realistic and relevant, but also so we were not imposing a model or approach – we very much wanted our collaborative development work to feel creative and affirming. We designed three seminar sessions and were interested to hear the tutor's reflections on the extent to which these activities supported engagement. These sessions were as follows:

- **Session 1:** using Mentimeter for label writing of artefacts. The aim was to facilitate students' critical thinking and collaboration skills in writing accessible and inclusive labels for objects that could be perceived as contentious or sensitive.
- **Session 2:** using Microsoft Whiteboard to encourage students to discuss and build collections of resources related to the movement and care of human remains within museums. Here students would be searching for and negotiating the inclusion of good quality sources around a contentious issue.
- **Session 3:** using carousel activities to support different discussion activities related to the de-naming of museums that were established or supported by eugenicists.

These activities enabled the module tutor to manage the introduction of potentially contentious or sensitive materials in inclusive ways, giving students agency around their

own involvement and contribution to classroom discussion. This approach avoided the need for open discussions or debates where polarised views become problematic and where the louder voices can sometimes obscure alternative perspectives.

Example 3 (Education). Culturally sensitive teaching and the university's eugenics legacy

The aim in this third example was to critically explore the teaching and learning implications of addressing the historical links with the eugenics movement at the university in a culturally sensitive manner. Drawing on notions such as 'uncomfortable' pedagogies and 'troubling' student emotions in the classroom (Xu and Stahl, 2023), we investigated how students encounter curriculum content that directly addresses the harms of eugenics legacies and the role of the university in eugenics histories. Here we wanted to ask:

- What does **culturally sensitive teaching** of eugenics legacies/histories 'look like' in the classroom?
- How does attending culturally sensitive teaching **improve students' experiences** of learning difficult knowledge such as eugenics?

We planned a standalone session that sought to use a culturally sensitive approach, emphasising the importance of recognising and reflecting on both the historical and contemporary implications of eugenics, as well as promoting critical thinking among students. Our thinking was to develop approaches to help students understand the impact of eugenics on various communities and to address the ongoing issue of ableism. This was significant since many discussions about education and education futures do not include disabled students (Morgan and Tutton, 2024). This meant working with students to think about how eugenics influences future-focused envisaging and to support potentially sensitive discussions around marginalisation and stigmatisation and the role of the institution in this. Additionally, we wanted to explore ways to enable students to respect the diverse backgrounds and experiences of their peers, ensuring discussions acknowledge differing perspectives, and reducing the risk of alienation or harm. We were keen to encourage students to reflect on this issue through the lens of their own cultural and moral frameworks, fostering a deeper and more personal understanding of the eugenics legacy at the university. Perhaps most importantly, we wanted to encourage students to question

and challenge discriminatory ideas, thus attempting to promote a more just and equitable worldview.

We created a two-hour session with a short presentation outlining the history of eugenics with images and a timeline. We wanted to demonstrate eugenics as a global phenomenon and show the spread and reach of these ideas in the first part of the twentieth century. However, to avoid the idea that this was a dim and distant history, we developed a timeline activity where students, both in-person and online, worked in groups to discuss our timeline of eugenics and linked this to events from their own countries. This helped us show the past, present, and future dimensions of eugenics and meant students could choose a starting point for talking about eugenics, rather than one decided by the tutor. We also used an image pairing activity (as in Example 1) and showed a selection of historical and contemporary images related to eugenics. We asked students, both in-person and online, to pair two or three images and explain the connection they had made from their own perspectives. We facilitated a discussion where students shared and explained their reasoning, highlighting the continuities and changes in the practices and perception of eugenics. Our team has reflected on whether the use of interactive activities, such as the timelines, helped to focus on the university's legacy in the eugenics movement and underscore the importance of institutional accountability with the need for reparative justice. We felt this approach not only engaged students effectively but also scaffolded the connection between historical events at the university and their own cultural backgrounds and experiences.

Discussion

The three examples presented in this paper demonstrate that a flexible approach is needed when supporting educators to introduce a topic such as a eugenics legacy into the curriculum. Key themes to emerge in our reflections on this work relate to students welcoming the opportunity to learn and engage with this difficult history through structured encounters with the content, logically integrated into the curriculum, rather than a generic overview, introduced at specific points such as induction. There was clear evidence of student positivity about learning the history of eugenics within the institution. As we spoke to students, they talked about the importance of the content, their experiences of learning differently about eugenics, and how they valued listening to peers. It was interesting that

they did not say the content should go undiscussed or that the approaches used were problematic or jarring. As a team, we were concerned about the impacts of 'getting it wrong' and so our small but structured approach to changing content and teaching practices, rather than the introduction of a completely new way of working, appeared to pay off. The task of intentionally introducing discomfort in the classroom needed to be negotiated carefully and the colleagues we worked with did have some experience of teaching what might be called contentious or difficult topics in various ways. For them, including content about eugenics histories was difficult, but their personal values and commitment to reflecting this post-inquiry work overrode any qualms.

The examples we have shared demonstrate what Gravett and Lyons-Baker (2024) note as an 'affective flip' in the classroom, and perhaps the most significant learning for our team was seeing this phenomenon in practice as we observed sessions. These moments were observed in the silences of realisation about the institution's history, the willingness to share a view or personal experience related to eugenics, or asking difficult questions about how we repair harm of this kind. We think the acknowledgement of and engagement with the university's history and legacy of eugenics is important, rather than the repetition of histories of the people who did harm, and that was recognised by students. Our examples demonstrate where this can be done in small but impactful ways and show that students were willing to take part in activities in ways they had not done before, and that tutors were effective in creating spaces where boundaries of discomfort could be slightly stretched, but never too far.

As argued by Karp (2019), working as a team of academics, professional services staff, and students was seen as important as a reparative tool. Our reflection has highlighted this as an example of authentic engagement with a very real and problematic legacy. We would advocate for staff and students working together to address these histories and legacies using dialogic methods of learning and development, rather than using strategies that close opportunities to work together on envisaging reparative futures. We contrast our approach with methods that deliver 'facts' (for example, a compulsory module on eugenics for all staff and students to complete) and we understand better that reparative pedagogies rely on exploring and unpacking complexity in community (Paulson, 2023).

Did our work 'heal'? It is not possible to know at this stage – except it could be argued that students who have learned about the eugenics legacy at the university have experienced

pedagogical approaches that supported them to critically engage and challenge historical harms. In this sense, a 'future-focused' university curriculum must necessarily relate to the past and address how as individuals we can challenge injustices when we see them, whether small or significant (Sriprakash, 2023).

Concluding thoughts

In this article, we have explored our work as a learning development team in supporting educators to introduce content related to UCL's eugenics history and legacy. We have outlined three different approaches to doing this work and linked our planning, implementation, and reflection on this work to the concept of reparative pedagogies. While it is not easy to claim what we have done is 'healing' per se, we think that to ensure our educational practices do not harm in the future, it is important to centre a reparative approach to learning development activities so that teaching about historic harms and their enduring legacies is done with care and respect. We have reflected on the need for small, but sustained, modifications of curriculum content and congruent pedagogies so students do not experience a misalignment between the histories and legacies they are learning about and the pedagogies that support critical engagement with histories of harm. It is also important that colleagues working to introduce these difficult histories in their module content are supported and the team-based approach utilised in this project with staff and students navigating this tricky territory together, offered a care-based strategy rooted in reparative practices.

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The authors did not use generative AI technologies in the creation of this manuscript.

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