

Chapter 5

Enhancing Student Agency as a Driver of Inclusion in Online Curriculum, Pedagogy, and Learning Content

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ABSTRACT

With advancements in technological innovation, the interconnectedness of the global economies and citizens is now inextricable. Education has been affected by globalisation, opening opportunities for more participation, particularly through online learning. Social cleavages and access for social justice are often addressed through admission-policy reform in the higher-education sector. While this is one aspect of increasing access to higher education, this chapter explores inequality as epistemic injustice in online programmes. Curriculum design and pedagogical approaches that embrace diverse students' epistemic positions enrich the learning experience while including students' realities. Student agency may allow for visibility of diverse students and also provide for the inclusion of their epistemic stances. Student agency can also lead to flexible, inclusive curriculum content. Based on literature, this chapter presents ways in which the student voice may be included in online learning curriculum, pedagogy and learning content.

INTRODUCTION

Humankind has throughout history ascribed to social, racial and cultural hierarchies primarily as a means to the attainment and preservation of leadership and power. People located at the bottom rungs of societies have often been denied the right to be heard or recognised as having the same rights as those on higher rungs. These social hierarchies are maintained and advanced in human social morphologies such as educational institutions.

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With advancements in technological innovation, the interconnectedness of the global economies and citizens is now inextricable. Education has been affected by globalisation, opening opportunities for more participation, particularly through online learning. With conventional face-to-face programmes, institutions are unable to meet the demand for education. Additionally, in a number of countries, the rising costs of education has been aggravated by decreased public funding for higher education. The adoption of online learning is a means to both increasing access and reducing the costs of higher education. However, with more institutions offering online-learning programmes as either core offerings or short programmes, marketisation has become prevalent in the higher education landscape. Reaching out to students across the globe is the norm on the internet. With an increased reach of online-learning programmes, against the backdrop of marketisation, student populations are becoming increasingly racially, socially and culturally diverse.

Online learning programmes provide opportunities for admission to students from diverse racial, social and cultural backgrounds. While this is one of the benefits of online learning, Students from groups minority backgrounds form the bulk of dropouts and failures (Fraser et al., 1990). Students from lower socioeconomic groups are found to face discrimination and ridicule among the UK Russell Group universities. This is reflected in bullying and harassment over their accents and backgrounds leading to student attrition (Parveen, 2020). The literature provides a number of reasons for this, including under-preparation, poor language proficiency (Baker, 2011), psychological factors, social factors, cultural or environmental factors (Bauman et al., 2019) and ill-chosen career paths (Fraser et al., 1990). In addition, a lack of engagement due to a feeling of “not fitting in” further works against racial and cultural minorities.

Curriculum and pedagogical approaches are widely recognised as agents in a number of approaches to change. These include critical pedagogy (Khan & Gabriel, 2018; Mahmoudi, 2014; Woldeyes, 2018), transformative learning (Mackinlay & Barney, 2014; O’Donoghue et al., 2009), transgressive learning, inclusive pedagogy (Loreman, 2017), ontological access (Winberg & Makua, 2019), and pedagogy for possibility thinking (Hempel-jorgensen, 2015).

This chapter focuses on online-learning programmes, which by nature are spatially and temporally neutral. The affordances offered by online learning, when well-designed and appropriated, act as agents for increased diversity and inclusion. This chapter argues the case for growing epistemic justice by including the student voice in classroom transactions. This argument focuses on enhancing student agency in curriculum and pedagogical approaches. This chapter explores the role curricula, pedagogical approaches and learning content may play as agents of inclusion and social justice, referencing prior empirical studies.

ONLINE-LEARNING GROWTH AND INCLUSIVITY

The introduction of the internet in the 1990s marked a turning point for access to higher education. Coupled with the use of Web 2.0 technologies, learning programmes allowed for the innovative use of pedagogy in areas such as active learning, collaborative learning, peer assessment, and seamless, flexible and personalised learning (Gilbert, 2015). Additionally, online learning allows for cross-border enrolment, enabling the diversification of student populations. As a technology-driven field, online-learning pedagogy has evolved as technology has evolved. The role of machine learning, artificial intelligence and the internet of things is increasing in the online-learning context. Some changes affecting the provision of online learning are:

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