

## Chapter 17

# Embracing Technology and Community Engagement as a Teaching and Learning Medium in Social Justice Education

**Loshini Naidoo**

*University of Western Sydney, Australia*

### ABSTRACT

*This paper examines the varied learning experiences that integrated socio-cultural theory, community engagement and e-learning offered by the “Diversity, Social Justice and Schooling” subject at the University of Western Sydney. This subject engaged university students in the learning process in a reflective and critical way, by responding to a need identified by community. Together with education technology, subject content knowledge and community engagement, the social justice subject aimed to enhance the educational achievement of marginalised groups, while simultaneously supporting pre-service teachers in the context of their development as educators committed to a social justice ethos.*

### INTRODUCTION

Schools in Greater Western Sydney, where most UWS education graduates will work as teachers, now enroll children and youth from first or second generation families from more than a hundred and fifty nations. As school populations become more diverse in cultures and languages, the need for pre-service teachers to better understand and work with issues of difference in the classroom becomes

critical. For pre-service teachers this means being able to understand and examine their own values and beliefs about the role of education in creating social justice and cross-cultural understanding. To address these learning needs, connections are made between the teaching unit, “Diversity, Social Justice and Schooling” and the community engagement/service learning programs, Refugee Action Support (RAS), Crossing Borders and Community Action Support (CAS). Pre-service teachers are encouraged to articulate a vision of teaching and learning within the diverse society we have

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become and then use that vision to infuse social justice and cultural issues throughout their teaching. Moreover, pre-service teachers are provided with an opportunity to experience the social justice unit through e-learning pedagogy and academic service learning projects and activities which enable them to understand the broader societal implications of being a teacher and appreciate the ultimate aims of teaching: to help students learn, to respect each other and to become active agents in their own professional development by having the ability to keep an open mind and bring about change in the teaching-learning process.

The analysis of the content of discourse within the online reflective journals provides a useful example of transcripts of discussions that are easily accessible and noteworthy evidence of learning among the participants. Using a social constructivist view of learning allowed me as a researcher to focus on a search for evidence in the online discussions, in which participants link new knowledge to their prior knowledge (Boekaerts & Simons, 1995) and make meaning through their experience in the service learning programs (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989). Further, by using a socio-cultural theory framework, that learning is a process of participating in cultural practices (Lave & Wenger, 1991), in this case, in the various community programs, analysis of the online reflective journals was possible. The e-learning component of the service learning initiatives were able to guide, facilitate and structure the contributions of pre-service teachers and others, and in so doing assisted pre-service teachers to modify and develop their own learning processes. In conceptualising the role of social justice for teacher preparation, the focus in the article is on the role of e-learning in assisting educators to critique the larger socio-cultural, political dimensions of teaching and schooling. This is in keeping with the assertion by Cochran – Smith (1999) that “part of teaching for social justice, is deliberately claiming the role of educator as well as activists” (p. 116).

The Delhi Declaration (UNESCO 1994), clause 2.8 stated that:

*Education is, and must be, a societal responsibility, encompassing governments, families, communities and non-governmental organizations alike; it requires the commitment and participation of all, in a grand alliance that transcends diverse opinions and political positions.*

The implied relationship between learner and teacher is one of partnership and social justice that promotes collective action. In the context of education, social justice means examining why and how schools are unjust for some students. “It [a concern for social justice] means analysing school policies and practises... that devalue the identities of some students while overvaluing others” (Nieto, 2000, p. 183). This means that both teachers and students are jointly constructing knowledge in an environment of mutual respect and technology to improve the quality of the learning experience. Eisen (2001) investigated peer-learning partnerships used as a professional development tool for community college teachers, and identified a “peer dynamic” important to transformative learning. Particularly important to establishing authentic relationships was the equalization of power between teaching partners, allowing for learner autonomy and the development of trust. Providing direct and active learning experiences (e.g., e-learning and service learning), the availability of a process for fostering transformative learning, the importance of e-learning as pedagogy and the nature and importance of support when fostering transformative learning (Naidoo, 2009).

### **Service-Learning, Social Justice and Teaching**

Service learning is used as both a philosophy of teaching and as a pedagogical tool. As a philosophy of teaching, service learning reflects a broad social justice approach to teaching which

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