

The Hidden Curriculum of Online Learning: Discourses of Whiteness, Social Absence, and Inequity

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Equity: Going Beyond Access

My research deals with cultural discourses that perpetuate the existing societal inequities in CSCL practices. I define equity as the fair distribution of opportunities to learn within a fair learning context and regard CSCL practices situated into social, political, historical, and economical discourses to explore how students *live* the curriculum with respect to notions of equity and social justice. For example, my most recent ethnographic work in digitally-mediated contexts illustrates how online experiences are defined in relation to the discourses of Whiteness: the hidden curriculum of online education maintains cultural hegemony and creates inequitable or unfair learning experiences through cultural differences.

I follow the argument that equity is not about quantitative differences or sameness of educational inputs or outputs but pedagogical approaches in which social, political, and historical structures inevitably affect day-to-day classroom interactions (Esmonde, 2009). As an emerging learning scientist, my research agenda expands this idea through three interwoven themes.

First, I go beyond the notion of a digital gap (or digital divide) to conceptualize the issues related to equity and diversity in CSCL. Critical research regarding social justice and equity has limited its scope to simply the issue of access to technology or the Internet, leading to a common misconception that equity and diversity can be addressed if individuals have access to educational resources (Harasim, 2000). This idea is inherent in research regarding open-flexible access. Such claims, however, assume that access to online environments alone is sufficient to foster diversity and support equity, completely disregarding the way macro-level societal dynamics can manifest themselves and operate to reproduce inequities that exist in society at large.

Second, I challenge the rather taken-for-granted notion that online learning environments democratize education by giving voice to those who are otherwise unheard. When issues of participation are considered, much research has argued that the appearance of equal conversational relations implies the presence of equitable learning conditions. This perspective assumes that giving individuals a chance to participate to an online discussion is more democratic compared to traditional classrooms (Swan & Shih, 2005). Measuring the quantity of messages posted or received, researchers have concluded that the nature of communication in online learning environments provides equitable learning conditions since those who are traditionally shut out of discussions – people from under-privileged cultural groups, women, minorities, or even people shy in nature – can benefit from the increased possibilities for participation. However, just because students can login to the digitally-mediated environment and interact with others does not ensure equitable learning experiences. I analyze how power relationships, otherness, privilege, or marginalization in relation to the material and symbolic conditions within which the daily learning practices are embedded. My work illustrates that democratizing education does not end when individuals gain access to online learning environments. My work shows that “having voice” or “being heard” are subject to the rules of engagement and the process of identification in learning contexts.

Third, I introduce a new concept, social absence, through which online education research can better understand and study online experience. Social absence is based on the concept of social presence; a concept that has long been employed to study human experience in online learning environments. Social presence is defined as the degree to which individuals represent themselves and perceive others in digitally-mediated (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 1999). It is constructed dialogically; it not only facilitates individuals’ practices in online contexts but also conveys socio-historical norms, values, beliefs, and perspectives that individuals bring into online learning environments (Oztok, 2016). I argue that a comprehensive understanding of online experience, however, should go beyond how individuals represent themselves and further include the identifications that individuals consciously filter-out when they create their online existence. I term these consciously filtered-out identifications social absence (Oztok, 2014). Therefore, I regard social absence as the extent to which particular identifications are not represented in one’s social presence. I formulate the relationship between social presence and absence in relation to the concept of impression engagement (Goffman, 1959) and demonstrate that identification in collaborative work is not only articulated by what is represented but also defined by what is filtered-out in that particular representation. I operationalize the concept of social absence to show the ways that individuals may hide behind their relative anonymity to overcome exclusion based on their socio-cultural identifications. In order to explain how individuals have differentiated learning experiences based on their identification, my work illustrates how individuals are caught in the double bind (Spivak, 1999) of identification, revealing the otherwise hidden effects of cultural hegemony on the construction of self in CSCL settings.

Taken together, my research agenda revolves around ways of conceptualizing the relationship between macro-level discourses and micro-level learning contexts: the ways in which material and symbolic realities of daily life manifest themselves and effect the ways that individuals identify themselves based on their social

presence and absence. I conceptualize this relationship with respect to the concept of hegemony (Gramsci, 2000) to show that cultural hegemony leads to an inequitable CSCL practices or contexts.

Theoretical and Methodological Approaches

At the theoretical level, my work is bricolage of ideas for and approaches to questions concerning equity and social justice. I derive theories from critical pedagogy, curriculum studies, and learning sciences to investigate the ways in which culture play a role in collaborative practices. In particular, I focus on how members of group work are positioned in relation one another and how that discursive positioning have an impact on their learning.

At the methodological level, my work is derived from the ethnographic approaches. I employ critical discourse analysis to analyze the otherwise hidden manifestations of social, political, historical, and economical discourses.

Future Work

My immediate research agenda is concerned with the current hype and enthusiasm regarding MOOCs and the increased promotion of online certification programs that are offered by public school boards or higher education institutions in their commitment to accommodating public needs, widening access to materials, sharing intellectual resources, and reducing costs (Anderson, 2008). While I acknowledge and appreciate this altruistic mission, such courses may in fact perpetuate inequitable learning situations if not enough attention is paid to the points highlighted above. Many students continue to experience inequity through the problems associated with digital divide. Yet, educational inequity still exists even when one has crossed the digital divide and has access to digital resources. My research agenda aims to expand the argument that access does not solve nor provide equitable learning conditions since equity is a continuous process that requires awareness of the material realities of students with different cultural backgrounds, as well as a commitment to solidarity through diversity and difference.

I regard my previous work as a basis for my future research agenda rather than as a conclusive solution or a blueprint for a problem. As such, I hope my work will spark thought, controversy, debate, and further research on this topic.

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