


Chapter 67

Capabilities–Based Transformative Online Learning Pedagogy for Social Justice

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents pedagogical approaches for online learning with a focus on pedagogies that support interaction and active learning amongst diverse student populations. Understanding the challenges that feed social inequality are broad and complex nexus challenges, the various aspects and activities that go into learning design are discussed from the perspective of fostering equal representation and social justice in the online learning environment. While this chapter provides possible angles that may be employed to facilitate learning in a diverse student population, empirical studies need to be undertaken to test the efficacy of the approaches suggested.

INTRODUCTION

Two decades ago, South Africa entered a new era of democracy. The initial euphoria has been tempered by the hard work that followed in transforming and rebuilding the major social institutions of the country to address the vast challenges of inequality, poverty and the need for economic growth. Higher education remains, as it was then, central to the projects of modernisation, transformation and renewal in the country, just as it too is subject to those same forces. - Prof Themba Mosia, Chair of Council for Higher Education. (South Africa Council on Higher Education, 2016)

This chapter sheds light on enhancing social justice through the use of the capabilities approach and critical pedagogy in online learning. Social justice as a construct is presented, explored and explained. This chapter further explores pedagogical practices in online learning using the capabilities approach as a framework for enhancing social justice, and provides direction in designing instruction for online

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learning. Using the capabilities approach and critical pedagogy (Letizia, 2013) in online interfaces, this chapter presents a transformative pedagogical framework that re-aligns the social justice role of higher education in Open, Distance and eLearning (ODEL) learning programmes. This can be achieved by rethinking content formation, content dissemination and technological use in online learning contexts (Garuba, 2018).

The role of higher education has primarily been that of preparing students for the world of work as well as meeting the development, and particularly economic goals of nations. While this role is recognised as important, it is not the only role higher education should play when facilitating formal higher learning. The higher education graduate ought to be viewed as a well-rounded individual who is secure in his identity, his worth and is able to use his full repertoire of skills to not only contribute to, but also benefit from society. Higher education systems that do not nurture the full capabilities of individual students may lead to disenfranchised students, escalating attrition rates and student unrests disrupting the running of higher education institutions.

Prior to 1994, South Africa was governed by a legislatively supported segregation system known as Apartheid. Apartheid was a system based on racial segregation and discrimination where the South African population was classified into four distinct population groupings; White, Black, Indian, and Coloured. Resources were allocated according to racial profiles with black people receiving the least and poorest resources. The education system at the time separated students according to the racial groupings. A basic education system that has often embedded inequalities associated with colonial and postcolonial political economies and socio-cultural divisions (Howell, 2018), has influenced the higher education experience in Africa and South Africa. This social reproduction process in higher education is sometimes a surreptitious promotion of political and ideological interests of elitist power actors. In this regard, higher education should actively seek to address social inequality and promote equity and social justice. As the education system was used to propagate Apartheid policies in the past, so too may the education system be used as a tool for social justice today.

EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA POST DEMOCRACY

Soon after the attainment of democracy in 1994, South Africa's need to accommodate a growing number of deserving students, was greater than available spaces for placement in conventional higher education institutions. The need, driven by the exclusion of a vast majority of the population to quality education by the Apartheid regime, resulted in the adoption of an education system with key principles that included social justice through admission to education. Social justice stood and still stands alongside the meeting of national development goals in the context of higher education provision. Over two decades, admission to higher education by the previously marginalised majority population has more than tripled across all sectors of higher education and training. With this rise in the number of students seeking quality higher education, demand grew at a pace that available institutions could not absorb. Open Distance and eLearning (ODEL) which allows students to register for flexible learning options was seen as a viable option for addressing this need. ODeL has, over decades, promoted a high degree of open admission to higher education, particularly to the marginalised, non-traditional student. One of the reasons for widening enrolment is the envisioned economic development and social justice. In spite of increased admissions to higher education institutions, levels of attrition are high and are racially skewed with the majority black and coloured students forming the highest dropout demographic (Otu & Mkhize, 2018).

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