

GUEST EDITORIAL PREFACE

Social Justice in eLearning

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ABSTRACT

Social justice as a process is concerned with fairness and empowerment, whilst elearning involves the use of Information and Communication Technologies to enhance learning and teaching in a wide range of educational contexts. Authors were challenged to conceptualize human concerns arising from the use of ICT in education, and to consider the ways in which elearning can exacerbate or effectively address pre-existing inequities, and the extent to which elearning is a problem or a solution in terms of social justice. In every social and educational context, there are dynamics of power and authority. Some groups may be oppressed and marginalized, while others define the status quo and hold the advantages. This is the case whether or not learning technologies are involved. However, elearning raises new concerns and offers new opportunities to create socially just spaces and processes for learning. This special issue is an opportunity to explore key aspects of equity, discrimination, safety, empathy and human rights in elearning contexts, face-to-face and online.

Keywords: social justice, ethics, Internet, education, case studies, equality, fairness, elearning

The juxtaposition of ethics and Internet use is a reminder that technology is a human concern. It is vital not to lose sight of the humanity at the centre of technological progress and to consider the extent to which developments in information and communication technologies and new media impact upon the lives of people, for better and for worse.

Education is a human endeavour. The motto of my institution in Aotearoa, New Zealand proclaims: 'Ko Te Tangata' ('for the people'), in the local Maori dialect, our indigenous language. This is a reminder that we exist for the benefit of our people, and reflects our purpose in enhancing social wellbeing and contributing to sustainable economic futures (University of Waikato, 2014). I am proud that my institution emphasizes these socially responsible purposes, and am confident that many other educational institutions around the world have similar vi-

sions, and are comprised of staff who share a commitment to social good.

A fundamental underpinning belief then is that education is for the good of humanity and for the promotion of social benefit. This is the point of continuity that persists even in the face of change in the ways education occurs. As our teaching moves to blended and online spaces, incorporating flexible options and responding to student and societal needs, the one constant is the pursuit of social justice.

Social justice is a commitment to equality and fairness alongside recognition that human rights are not in reality shared by all of society due to persistence of power differentials. Marginalization, oppression and discrimination are ongoing factors in the lived experience of some people and groups. Not everyone has a voice or equitable access to educational opportunities.

This special issue invited interpretations of social justice pertaining to elearning contexts. Social justice as a process is concerned with fairness and empowerment, whilst elearning involves the use of Information and Communication Technologies to enhance learning and teaching in a wide range of educational contexts. Authors were challenged to conceptualize human concerns arising from the use of ICT in education, and to consider the ways in which elearning can exacerbate or effectively address pre-existing inequities, and the extent to which elearning is a problem or a solution in terms of social justice.

In every social and educational context, there are dynamics of power and authority. Some groups may be oppressed and marginalized, while others define the status quo and hold the advantages. This is the case whether or not learning technologies are involved. However, elearning raises new concerns and offers new opportunities to create socially just spaces and processes for learning. This special issue is an opportunity to explore key aspects of equity, discrimination, safety, empathy and human rights in elearning contexts, face-to-face and online.

As expected, social justice concerns pertaining to elearning include the role of relationships in online learning, and teaching online as a caring and ethical practice. Fundamentally, the special issue adopts a humanist stance, emphasizing how people experience educational contexts involving the use of computers and associated technologies. Priority has been given to submissions that highlight ethical dilemmas relating to the socially just use of learning technologies, with implications for improved practice and pedagogies.

Jill Downing from the University of Tasmania considers access to education in her case study of Steven: an autistic, mature-aged university student participating in an online initial teacher education course. Downing highlights the diversity of university students and the responsibility to cater for student needs by being attentive and responsive to those needs. In effect, the point is that university staff need to learn from and with students and to give careful con-

sideration to student perspectives when designing and teaching online. Such student-centred attention is an ethical imperative. Downing's work is a reminder of the importance of every voice in a social justice agenda: "assumptions must be challenged and a lone voice is as important as a group chant, if social justice (and credible research) is truly valued".

Downing's findings, and Steven's story, have specific implications for supporting and empowering students with autism who are studying in elearning environments. The elearning environment can be an obstacle or an enabler, depending on the design of activities and the match with students' needs.

Writing from my home institution, my colleague Sara Archard from the University of Waikato examines the ways in which digital technologies in an online teacher education programme can facilitate a sense of belonging for learners. Emphasizing the need for equitable access and inclusion, Archard points out that initial access to an online course is insufficient to support retention of students. A step further is to cultivate a sense of connection and active involvement in an online community of learners, characterized by trust, shared purpose and collaboration. Digital technologies can serve to alienate students, exacerbating social injustice via marginalization and exclusion. However, the same technologies can be thoughtfully used to support inclusion and to enhance educational opportunities. Archard suggests ways in which online tools and approaches can be used to promote a sense of belonging in an online community of learners. Specific approaches to inclusive pedagogy include asynchronous online discussion, conversational podcasts, collaborative assignments and social spaces.

It is significant that the first two articles in this issue focus on teacher education, with regard to the need for inclusive and socially responsive pedagogy in initial teacher education programmes. It makes sense after all, that if we are serious about social justice in education, we look to educators to implement change. The teachers of teachers shoulder a special

responsibility in this regard, and it falls to us to model standards and expectations.

Stuart Dinmore from the University of South Australia also focuses on equitable access to higher education and on the need to design for inclusion. Dinmore makes a case for Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as a means of widening participation, catering for diversity, supporting student retention, promoting learning benefits and student success. UDL entails the provision of multiple means of representation, action and expression, and engagement, with the intention that differentiation enable choice, flexibility and elimination of barriers. These intentions are realized most effectively in a technology-rich environment due to the accessibility afforded by multimedia and the Internet. For Dinmore then, elearning and social justice involves “bringing previously excluded and disenfranchised students in from the margins to the center and creating a more inclusive experience for all students”.

Dinmore’s article concludes with specific examples of universally designed blended tasks, illustrative of the ways curriculum can be differentiated in higher education contexts.

Like Archard, Dinmore highlights the value of collaboration for learning, in recognition of the shared responsibility for student support, dialogue and feedback. When learners collaborate, there are greatly enhanced opportunities for learning from multiple perspectives and diverse experiences.

Importantly, Dinmore, Downing and Archard prioritise student perspectives, and assert the value of listening carefully to learners in order to understand their needs. In order to be socially responsive and just, consideration of student perspectives must inform pedagogy. It is crucial that diversity be met with respect and provision of choice.

Bryan Mann & Nik Barkauskas from Penn State stay with the online education theme, but this time within the compulsory schooling sector as opposed to higher education. Cyber charter schools provide alternative educational access for students who are excluded from traditional schooling (due to distance, preference or geog-

raphy). Writing in a U.S. context, Mann and Barkauskas review coverage of cyber charter schools and consider the potential for these schools to either detract from or to promote a social justice agenda. Key considerations in these authors’ interpretation of social justice are choice and individual rights. In common with Downing, Archard, and Dinmore, Mann and Barkauskas agree that one size does not fit all and that equitable education is responsive to individual needs.

A common concern in the articles by Downing, Archard, Mann and Barkauskas is the tension between access and obstruction. On the one hand, social justice is promoted by online education that enables access and thereby enhances equity by creating opportunities for students to participate in and benefit from educational opportunities. However, on the other hand the possibility that elearning may create new challenges and obstacles for students risks hindering their potential and failing to provide the promised benefits. If online education is in any way deficient, this is an equity issue, and it is clear that quality is a core component of inclusion.

In summary, social justice messages stemming from Downing’s case study coalesce around inclusion and respect for human difference. One student’s lived experience need not be dismissed as an aberration, but rather appreciated as an opportunity to respond constructively in the interests of equity. Archard highlights the importance of a sense of belonging and connection to a learning community, which is at the heart of inclusion. Practical examples of approaches to inclusive pedagogy are provided to illustrate Archard’s case. For Dinmore, differentiation is key to social justice and examples of inclusive design principles are translated into practice. Finally, Mann and Barkauskas also emphasise individual rights, in particular the right to choose a school.

In terms of methodology, the studies in this issue converge around a qualitative interpretivist paradigm. This is unsurprising in view of the primacy of lived experience in social justice circles. After all, we can only begin to under-

stand the social realities faced by individuals if we attend to their perceptions. Participant perspectives are complemented by document analysis, stories of experience, and illustrations of practice.

This small collection of studies is the tip of the iceberg in relation to scholarly consideration of social justice in elearning. Four countries are represented, but with no pretense of generalization. Issues around culturally responsive elearning have not been explored in as much depth as we hoped. This is but one area that merits further attention as researchers seek to explore social justice and elearning.

As a final offering, the special issue concludes with a book review, providing commentary on a recent IGI text introducing the realm of technoethics. In doing so, the focus remains on humanity and technology, with

relevant social justice issues including moral responsibility, ethical dilemmas, civil liberties and cyberactivism, and the double-edged sword that is technology.

It is hoped that readers of this special issue will be prompted to consider the relevance of the messages and questions in their own contexts.

- In what ways can elearning exacerbate or effectively address pre-existing inequities?
- What new human concerns arise from the use of ICT in education?
- How can we act to ensure that elearning is a solution to social injustice?

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Dianne Forbes is a Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Education at the University of Waikato, New Zealand. A former primary school teacher, Dianne has a longstanding interest in rich, creative learning afforded by ICT, when integrated in a purposeful and reflective manner. These days, Dianne teaches online, combining research interests with teaching practice to experiment with innovative pedagogies and elearning. Dianne is interested in the perspectives and experiences of tertiary students and teachers, particularly in relation to online and blended learning. For current research work and recent publications, please see: <http://edlinked.waikato.ac.nz/staff/Dianne%20Forbes>