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Toward Equitable Online Learning: Seeing the Missed Opportunities

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ABSTRACT

Access to online learning does not guarantee equitable learning experiences, particularly for students from diverse backgrounds, such as international students and members of indigenous communities. As an online, asynchronous instructor, I recorded my observations of students' online interactions and used reflexivity to analyze my journal entries. Participants' conversations followed the contemporary debates in a North American academic context. Members, particularly those from diverse backgrounds, actively negotiated their online presence or social absence based on those conversations. Their experiences remained on the margins only to stimulate robust discussions. Online course instructors must be proactive in creating inclusive virtual learning environments and be able to see the missed opportunities of knowledge construction through reflexivity, particularly in their awareness of what equity would entail in online learning environments with diverse learners.

Keywords: Equitable online spaces; Online learning; Reflexivity

INTRODUCTION

The pandemic and rapid transition to virtual spaces has contributed significantly to the rise of online learning and programs. It has also highlighted substantial issues and concerns about building online, equitable learning spaces for all, particularly when interactions cross international borders (Pregowska et al., 2021; Li & Lalani, 2020). Although online learning environments appear to be equal, not all student groups are served uniformly in them (Öztok, 2019). *Those who have worked closely on developing courses for educational leaders in North American classrooms may have observed* that students from diverse backgrounds and experiences, such as international students who haven't worked in local boards or North American school systems and lack contextual knowledge or vocabulary, may find it difficult to participate and engage fully in discussions that tend to center on improving local school systems and leadership practices. The challenges are not only about students' access to technology but also about their participation in online discussions, specifically how they make meanings of new concepts, their role in knowledge construction, and their participation in critique processes without being on the margins of the learning process. Knowledge construction in a group entails members sharing, utilizing, negotiating, and critiquing knowledge about a common object—a problem or a goal (Öztok 2016; Stahl & Hesse, 2009). Their learning depends not only on individual knowledge influencing the reasoning of other participants but also on collaborative meaning-making in a specific context. The context—physical or virtual— is a perceptually constructed space "where the material realities of the social, historical, economic, and political discourses intersect" (Öztok 2016, p. 162). Hence, learners must be offered opportunities to place their knowledge or unique perspectives within the context and draw a connection between their own thinking and the meaning of the group.

Instructors offering online courses comprised of students from diverse backgrounds need to pay close attention to group dynamics and the links between individual and group meaning. An instructor's lack of appreciation or understanding of diverse perspectives can greatly diminish students' learning experiences in these spaces (Kumi-Yeboah, 2018; Li et al., 2010). Instructors must not only be proactive in their efforts to create virtual spaces that are safe and inclusive of all students, but they must also be reflexive in their practices, which demand an understanding of what equity would look like in online learning spaces and ask whether these spaces, which appear neutral and offer flexible access to educational resources (Öztok, 2019), reproduce inequitable learning experiences for learners from diverse backgrounds.

This paper aims to examine equity issues in online learning by focusing mainly on online discussion forums. The article is my personal reflection as an instructor and shares my experience teaching an online, asynchronous course on educational leadership for graduate students at a North American institute. Based on instructors' reflections (see the researcher’s positionality), it urges developing guidelines for an equitable design and the reflexive practices of instructors of online courses in order to offer inclusive learning experiences for all students. This paper is composed of four parts: first, it explores some debates around the use of technology in education and expands on the online discussion model, which provides a systematic approach to making sense of data from instructors’ reflections. The subsequent section explains the concept of reflexivity as a methodology for researchers and instructors. The next section includes discussions and findings, and finally, the paper concludes with some suggestions for online instructors. Before proceeding to the literature section, I share the course context, the author's position, and the participants' backgrounds.

Researcher’s Positionality

My course can be described as an interdisciplinary course focused on educational leaders, administrators, and teachers, engaging them in ethical, equity, and social justice issues, adjudicating between conflicting values and beliefs, and incorporating different rights and human interests in their planning. The content of the course comprised various ethical schools of thought and approaches to social justice. The subthemes included ethics and ethical leadership (see Nash, 2022; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016; Tuana, 2014; Pinto et al., 2012), transformative leadership (see Shields, 2014), coloniality and educational discourse (see Lopez, 2021), and everyday dilemmas that educational leaders encounter, such as ethical leadership in schools serving African American children (see Williams, 2001) or students with refugee backgrounds (see Sellars & Imig, 2001); issues in ethical inquiry, including diversity (see Tuters & Ryan 2020; McPherson 2020; Tuck, 2014); and use of technology (see Granitz & Loewy, 20227; Dahya, 2017). Students were expected to demonstrate a theoretical and systematic understanding of different ethical schools of thought and leadership in diverse institutions and demonstrate the ability to critically engage in self-reflection by participating in group discussions and the analysis of real-world case studies and ethical dilemmas.

In my asynchronous online course, participants learned mainly through the course’s collaborative learning activities. They were required to review weekly assigned material, perform independent research, and participate in an online discussion forum to share and contribute to each other’s learning. Each week, a group of students volunteered to serve as leaders and came up with discussion prompts to moderate the weekly discussion. On the forum, participants posted their initial thoughts on the prompts by leaders and, later in the week, continued the dialogue by responding to their peers' posts. The group leaders often offered contradictory arguments or dilemmas that leaders encounter in their everyday work practices, which generated discussions and encouraged acknowledging alternative perspectives. This routine continued once a week during the entire semester.

As an instructor, I did not set out to write this article. Only after my first class did I notice the subtleties that kept me reflecting on my approach and carefully crafting each subsequent lesson throughout the course. The reflective journal I kept while teaching the course became the basis of this article; I employed a reflexivity approach to make sense of my observations, which I discuss in the following section. Sharing my reflections aims to contribute to advancing the field—equity in online spaces—and connect with other learners and instructors in virtual classrooms.

Many of the students in my course were not from the typical university demographic of the United States or Canada; instead, they were either from Indigenous communities or from countries like China, India, or the Middle East, attending online courses offered by institutions in response to the pandemic. I do not provide any of the learners' personal experiences or their notes, but rather my own observations on understanding student involvement in virtual settings. I make sense of their contributions, such as why some themes were debated one way and not another, why certain topics were addressed within specific groups of students, and why other students did not join in those discussions. To respect their privacy, I do not include any names or allude to individual students or their experiences, nor do I identify the institution's name or the teaching session.

In this article, I refer to students from diverse backgrounds, mainly international students, recently arrived immigrants, or even indigenous students, as group A. They were included in this group not because of the language barrier but because they were in the process of developing the academic vocabulary—and confidence—that are considered legitimate in academia, particularly in North America. Here, the term "academic vocabulary" refers to the rhetorical, cultural, and cognitive aspects of academic discourse (Loewenstein et al., 2012) or the cultural frameworks for reasoning (Loewenstein et al., 2012; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Thorton et al., 2012) that provide normative understandings for desirable behaviours in North American academic spaces while both allowing and restraining social practices, for instance the use of gender neutral words or preferred pronoun in conversations, etc. When I refer to group B, I mainly refer to students who were white, English speakers with superior academic vocabulary and who communicated their experiences and views in vivid, engaging discussion postings. Group B typically began the posts and established the tone for the week. Finally, in the class, the students who were children of immigrants familiar with Western contexts and contemporary issues in educational fields contributed to class discussions and served as a bridge between group dialogues; I kept note of their input and so included them in either group based on their contribution.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Education and Technology

Learning in online spaces is linked to building a community of inquiry, which involves information exchange, social presence, and the development of understanding (Garrison et al., 1999). What distinguishes a collaborative community of inquiry from a simple process of downloading information is the degree to which its members present themselves and are perceived by others in online spaces, or their social presence, in other words. It entails socioemotional interactions, which are critical to any instructor's achievement of educational goals (Garrison et al., 1999; Öztok, 2019).

For the instructors aimed at building reflective practitioners in educational leadership, equity concerns are at the heart of their work. In research, the plasticity of the term "equity" is not new; it can imply various meanings depending on different situations, but in general, equity alludes to justice or fairness, while equality denotes similarity (Esmonde, 2009). Thus, instructors would place a premium on the dynamics of interactions, meaning-making, and knowledge construction in virtual spaces over attaining the prescribed goals of the courses. Online education technology holds the promise of equity because it can provide more flexible and enhanced access to educational resources while removing time and location constraints (Harasim, 2000; Öztok, 2019). Furthermore, online venues are more neutral because they erase sociocultural differences, improving participant communication (Freeman & Bamford, 2004; Swan & Shih, 2005; Öztok, 2019). Many online education academics, however, have focused on academic content rather than the social structures of the broader context and have tended to treat students in online spaces as a homogeneous group, ignoring the power dynamics at work in the classroom, where competing economic, political, and social agendas pressure instructors and alter how they conduct their lessons (Öztok, 2019). This lack of attention to the broader context in online education settings is troubling because such forces can significantly impact participants' learning. Eventually, while online education venues provide a space for students to access academic content beyond the boundaries of time, space, and sociocultural factors, these platforms still contain power dynamics that can impact how knowledge is created and shared.

I will now briefly present a four-component model for productive online discussion that incorporated knowledge production into the online learning process and helped me conduct a methodical analysis of my findings.

Productive Online Discussion Model

Online learning can be done synchronously or asynchronously. Teachers and students interact simultaneously in synchronous learning, whereas asynchronous learning is self-paced, and participants do not need to engage in the learning process simultaneously. Asynchronous online learning provides participants additional time to reflect and self-regulate in response to peer engagement (Gerosa et al., 2010), resulting in deeper and more meaningful conversations (Hawkes & Romiszowski, 2001; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2006; Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006).

The Productive Online Discussion (POD) model promotes participation in online discussions by emphasizing cognitive processes, critical thinking, and social knowledge construction (Gao et al., 2009). Participants in online forums must use cognitive processes such as interpretation, elaboration, and making links to prior knowledge. An online engagement model also calls for critical thinking and evaluating different points of view. As a result, the model allows instructors to evaluate different parts of online learning (Gao et al., 2009). The model recommends that participants must (1) discuss to comprehend, (2) discuss to critique, (3) discuss to develop knowledge, and (4) discuss to share. Being reflexive of these four dispositions of online learning, instructors may create an equitable and engaging space for conversation, allowing participants to voice their perspectives and contribute their knowledge.

I adopted this framework to inquire into how students from diverse backgrounds participated in weekly discussions, including the topics they chose to explore, the ways they participated in critique, the experiences they shared, and the means by which they constructed knowledge among their peers. By embracing the concept of reflexivity, I was able to observe the social presence of the participants and how they interpreted new concepts and their learning experiences, which they occasionally shared in their individual written assignments.

REFLEXIVITY AS RESEARCH METHOD

Researchers have viewed the practice of reflexivity as an acknowledgment of how their own histories and experiences influence the study process and its findings, especially in qualitative research, rather than a claim of complete impartiality (see Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Kenway & McLeod, 2004; Pillow, 2003). Researchers take responsibility for their biases (Hopkins, 2008, p. 203) and reveal their underlying views and beliefs when choosing their methodological approach and explaining why they chose it (Shacklock & Smyth, 1998). It is also different from reflection in that reflective practice is focused on critical thinking, systematic reflection, and the reflective capacity of teacher-researchers (Watts, 2019), while reflexivity is focused on change and transformation (Powell et al., 2016; Ryan & Bourke, 2013).

Researchers in educational research can use reflexivity either as a part of the research process—assuming responsibility for their role in producing meaning and partial truths—or to locate and historicize their point of view in research (Kenway & McLeod, 2004). To use the concept effectively, researchers must understand its limitations and risks, such as how using the term without fully understanding it can lead to "comfortable" use (Pillow, 2003, p. 187) and "narcissistic accounts of yourself" (Trinh, 1989), which can be used to demonstrate a researcher's "positional validity" (Macbeth, 2001) rather than true transformation.

For educators, reflexivity involves critical thought—an internal dialogue—that assesses several perspectives in context—including the broader political and social context—to inform specific classroom actions (Lunn Brownlee et al., 2017; Archer, 2009). Hence, as an instructor, I considered reflection a crucial aspect of reflexivity, and reflexivity requires an internal dialogue and deliberate action following reflective thought. I paid close attention to my proclivity toward self-indulgent reflexivity and consciously tried to identify my biases and shifts in perspective. I reread my reflections and engaged in various internal conversations regarding why my first response to a particular observation was specific and whether or not this altered as I examined my beliefs about equity and transformation. My own learning experiences in class as a minority student, a woman, and a person of colour also influenced my perception of events and my desire for change. These reflexive practices shaped my understanding of online learning spaces and prompted me to seek classroom equity.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

I present my reflections on the two broad themes that emerged throughout the weekly discussions and expand on them in connection to each disposition indicated in the POD model.

Decolonizing Educational Practices and Deconstructing Knowledge Frameworks

Decolonizing educational practices for educational leaders was one of the key themes that emerged and was explored throughout the course as students sought to connect the course concepts with their own experiences and shared those with other participants to re-evaluate the dominant knowledge frameworks.

Reading over the comments, I noticed that students were making an effort to draw parallels between theory and practice. They all agreed that the institutionalization of Eurocentric knowledge through colonialism rendered it the de facto, objective form of knowledge, or the dominant knowledge framework, as I refer to it in this discussion. Moreover, decolonial methods in education present a tremendous intellectual challenge since they necessitate attention to the views of historically underrepresented communities. Students developed an appreciation for decolonization as a process that might lead to the incorporation of a decolonizing framework into educational practices in order to address social, economic, racial, and gender inequities. Participants broadened the concepts by *agreeing* with what their peers said and adding new references, such as using culturally responsive pedagogy, making intentional efforts, critically assessing and making existing curriculum antiracist, or “critiquing with promise” (Shields, 2014, p. 333).

However, I noticed a difference in how students from diverse backgrounds participated in the conversation. These students contributed to the discussion by sharing their personal experiences and insights. They did not criticize any policy in particular but instead pointed to their own marginalization to argue that decolonization must be a deliberate process. I observed their insistence on "reconciliation" as a process, not a one-time event, if the educational institutions are to confront the prevalent colonial perspectives. Or their insistence on "inclusion," as in centring minority voices in education programs, to question the coloniality of legitimate knowledge. Or their caution to the "language" of western knowledge, which is objective and acquired by scholarly knowledge production in contrast to traditional cultures, where knowledge is transferred from elders to younger generations through oral tradition. They argued that communities marginalized by unequal social structures could not be expected to construct a more equitable society. Hence, school administrators should intentionally examine how different demographics perceive the curriculum and strive to confront the deficit thinking that is common among educators.

Their peers acknowledged repression and the imposition of colonial knowledge at that juncture. Some also began their conversation with, "Sorry to hear about your experience." Yet the academic dialogue could only go so far since the participants, both from groups A and B, found it challenging to navigate the unfamiliar terrain of dismantling hegemonic frameworks, especially when their only previous interaction with their peers had been virtual. For instance, when a member of group A stated that some teachers might not realize they are operating from a colonialist mindset because they have never experienced it in their own lives, I waited for members from either group to discuss this further by agreeing, disagreeing, or problematizing the thought, which needed further unpacking. Still, no one pointed that out or discussed it further. Questions such as experiencing colonialism to understand it and the difference that it would make to our perceptions of coloniality could be further interrogated. Could there be a distinction in the experiences of colonial subjects between those who have experienced direct colonialism and those who have not? And how can participants of the course ethically learn from members' lived and non-lived experiences of colonialism without further probing them to enrich the discussion? One of the group B members asked about the specific activities an administrator may take to assess the extent to which coloniality exists in their institution. Another person proposed that the school examine the faculty's makeup and how resources and procedures sustain coloniality. The member of Group A who started this notion did not carry on the conversation. As an instructor, I imagine the conversation would have lasted a little longer in an in-person setting since this perspective's absence or silence would have been more thoroughly felt. The conversations in group B tended to focus more on professional development and strengthening institutional support. They would cite and criticize a particular policy with which group A participants could only partially engage. Participants in group B also suggested increased community engagement where possible, and some members expressed concern about teachers' lack of time and opportunity to engage in reflective practices owing to the pressures of completing the curriculum.

During such conversations, the participants, mainly from Group B, often led to a "list of resources" that could be found on school boards, ministry websites, or university resources. While I consider that those conversations could have been instances of knowledge construction, the practice of directing the conversation to a list of resources—the legitimate academic vocabulary in a North American context—in this particular context, however, posed an obstacle since it turned the conversation back to institutionalized forms of knowledge by decentering Group A's experiences, which were clearly present in the class. It might not be intentional, but being aware of their online social presence helped the participants learn that using ready-made resources was a simpler alternative than trying to unpack complex ideas while navigating the power dynamics of online learning spaces. I returned to the initial discussion thread, where members had to introduce themselves to the group. Participants provided brief information about their teaching and learning experiences if they were in the North American context only. And while many of them mentioned the program/year and their preferred pronoun, I was surprised at how few mentioned ethnicity, which came up later in the conversations or in a one-on-one meeting with me (see details later in the discussion). That post, I realized, was the first step in constructing the context (Öztok 2016). Many of the students were in their final or nearing-final courses, and by then, they had determined what kinds of conversations were acceptable in that particular institutional context, what academic vocabulary was used, and what could be said in the open discussion forum versus what could be said in one-on-one meetings. I also knew from previous interactions with students and being a student the level of trust to be placed in institutional databases (emails, mailing lists) with personal information and opinions. Together with the prospect of taking a course with a new instructor (a woman of colour in a North American university), these could be some of the factors that aided in constructing the course's context, in which participants crafted their responses and engaged with each other.

Due to the potential challenge of deconstructing knowledge frameworks or critically exploring complex concepts in a digital setting, these discussions sometimes needed more depth, thus limiting the focus to surface-level considerations like legislation or practices rather than addressing inequality and underlying standpoints. As an instructor, I had to be creative if I wanted to expand these conversations in meaningful ways. I shifted my focus to hypothetical scenarios and dilemmas that educators might confront in their practice and shared tools, such as self-reflection and reflexivity, to take more thoughtful approaches. I appreciated the students' attempts to further the dialogue and encourage each other to adopt a more ethical and introspective stance in their own communities. In addition, drawing parallels between formal schooling and broader society remained a common thread of interest for all the students. They shared and gained from one another's educational experiences, which ranged from international private schools in the global south to public schools with indigenous populations in North America. Yet, I observed that while the online environment allows participants more time to reflect and respond, institutional norms shape the context in which they compose their responses and interact with one another. Decolonial ways of thinking remained a popular topic. Still, in the actual setting, participants were thinking of decolonial practices as educators, as something in their schools or their classrooms only, and not in their current online practices as individuals. Similarly, race was frequently mentioned in relation to colonial institutions and cultural superiority, and "economic domination in the system of capitalism" (Lopez, 2020, p. 32) was not an idea that was extensively discussed because the program was designed for educational leaders, who primarily focused on educational policies and practices rather than the economics and finance of education.

Diversity, Inclusion, and Intersectionality

Another recurrent theme in the discussions was diversity, inclusion, and intersectionality. Participants discussed that one of the barriers to a comprehensive understanding of diversity in educational leadership is its "plasticity"; despite its appeal, the term diversity has yet to be fully defined by its proponents (Nofal, 2023, p. 4). Participants acknowledged that a leader should consider how racial and ethnic variety, cultural and religious diversity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic position, ability, and other forms of diversity of the student body could impact achieving the institution's goals (Shields, 2014). As a result, educational leaders' concerns for diversity may serve as an underlying principle rather than a response to exclusion and marginalization in their educational institutions.

I noticed that the discussion moved on from recognizing the growing demographic diversity within Western countries—primarily due to global economic interests—to how schools adapt to meet the needs of diverse students. Participants critiqued how a deficient lens among educators prevents them from appreciating and comprehending diversity and being conscious of their prejudices. Instead of a melting pot, they frequently used the metaphor of a Chinese hotpot to comprehend the notion of diversity in a Western context (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). Furthermore, they were aware of and made efforts to connect the dots between social justice concerns and transformative ethical leadership practices by referring to intersectionality theory and emphasizing the lack of diverse voices and experiences—sources of knowledge construction—in academic policy and practice at the micro and macro levels.

Here is where I noticed inconsistencies in their conversations.

Several students expressed skepticism about the diversity agenda's ethical implications. Students from diverse backgrounds voiced their belief that discrimination against people of colour results from systemic, institutional racism. They were also curious about the challenges school administrators face in embracing diversity and how these challenges are met through a transformative leadership framework in Western contexts. Group A students with professional experience brought up the funding issue and questioned the financial planning of current diversity initiatives, which require robust backing at the national or state level. Neither group elaborated on these concepts. In one instance, a student from Group A asked a school leader in Group B about the challenges of embracing diversity and whether or not the concept of transformative leadership could be helpful in practice. The student replied that critical, transformative leadership was the key to dialogue and mutual adherence to respectful engagement. How in practice? The conversation never progressed. Similarly, a student from the Indigenous group reflected and explained how transformative leadership might benefit the community on various occasions. Still, the engagement with that post was minimal, and the discussion never progressed.

Group B concentrated on recruiting policies and professional development while examining diversity. They criticized widespread hiring practices in local ministries that make it difficult for individuals of colour to enter the field. Similarly, the professional development discussion circled teacher preparation and principal preparation programs, delving into their structures and credentials as well as their escalating prices and unfilled administrator pools. There were small occasions of interactions when Group B was curious to know why people of colour chose not to apply for administrative positions at the boards or ministries as educational leaders—and where children of immigrants brought up in a western context significantly contributed by pointing out the intersectional barriers—but the conversation mostly referred to specific policies. Participants in Group B reported that experienced white teachers have more chances to become principals, and white male leaders mostly dominate the leadership positions.

I also observed that students were intrigued by the concept of transformative leadership, how it manifested itself in various contexts, and the complications that came with it. They approached it from multiple perspectives, with some emphasizing that transformative leadership must be intentionally incorporated into the practices of educational leaders rather than being used as a performance enhancer; some were inspired by social justice education for students, while others contrasted it with transactional leadership. However, neither the larger group nor the students from diverse backgrounds engaged in a conversation to imagine transformative practices by educational leaders for diverse communities, whether they belonged to those groups or not. For an instructor, that seemed like a missed opportunity. The participants wanted to comprehend, critique, share, and develop knowledge. However, the online environment limited their opportunity to unpack dominant knowledge frameworks—to understand and learn together—which would be slightly better in in-person sessions due to the presence of time, space, and sociocultural cues. For example, during one of the weeks, the discussion was on transformational leadership, and one of the female members stated that in schools, female principals lead solo with numerous observers and critics. Another participant concurred and questioned whether female leaders are indeed more interpersonally oriented and sensitive or whether the difference is context-dependent. They continued asking if a female immigrant leader would still be considered emotional. How are women whose orientations are more traditionally masculine perceived? Is an older female leader considered more capable and proficient than a younger leader? Are women's leadership styles more democratic since they have been socialized as people-pleasing and deferential? These intersectional queries were quite intriguing. I observed that, although Group B members posed the questions, engagement with this post could have been more extensive but was primarily limited to a few female members of Groups A and B. The male participants did not participate in this discussion thread. Instead, they focused on incorporating all voices from diverse groups, such as black people, women, and LGBTQ2S+, to achieve transformational leadership.

As an instructor, I had some access to those cues. On various occasions in my course, I organized one-on-one meetings with participants to discuss their research interests, during which they also discussed their broader passions and professional challenges. What struck me most was how the group members discussed topics in our one-on-one conversations differently than in the online forum. The participants' online social presence reflected a limited version of themselves in which they did not wholly represent themselves; for instance, they would sometimes take distance from their ethnicity and other times their gender in conversations to avoid potential prejudices and maintain the neutrality of dialogue. This was especially true for indigenous and immigrant women of colour, who sometimes thoroughly disagreed with prevalent educational leadership practices but chose to discuss that with me in one-on-one meetings and not in the discussion forum. Although I encouraged participants to exchange email addresses and join the WhatsApp group that the students had created to stay in touch, I was aware that the structure of an online learning environment would allow them to choose their online presence or absence on specific discussions, thereby restricting the knowledge-building component or the imagining of transformative solutions.

After learning about intersectional barriers and noticing the online social presence (or lack thereof), I asked all the participants to keep a personal reflexive notebook where they could write down times when their ideas reflected their beliefs and/or the dominant frameworks. I would speak about reflexive note-taking each week and encourage students to record their thoughts and incorporate them into their activities. To continue the discussion, I urged participants to consider how the concept might be applied in a real-world context and how their insights could support their colleagues in refining the concepts and enhancing their practices. I anticipate that the next time, I will ask participants to make entries on the presence of identities, the absence of identities, and the coloniality of space from the start, as well as invite them to think about their intersectional identities in their introductory posts. This will be my small step toward a major leap toward a positive shift in online learning experiences as an instructor.

CONCLUSION

The article highlights some of the challenges faced by instructors aiming to create equitable online spaces for learners. By revisiting my online teaching experiences using the concept of reflexivity and building on two themes that recurred throughout the course's weekly conversations, I share the dynamics of student participation in understanding, discussing, sharing, and constructing knowledge.

Online education technology promises equity since it may offer flexible access by reducing time and place restrictions and is considered neutral since it eliminates intercultural barriers, enhancing participant communication. Moreover, asynchronous online learning could likely provide participants with more meaningful engagement by offering more time to think and self-regulate in response to peer involvement. However, in an effort to provide equitable experiences, I could see the missed opportunities in online learning spaces for knowledge sharing and knowledge construction by carefully observing participants’ interactions.

I demonstrated how, in discussion forums, interactions such as the most liked post or debated subject, the material referenced, and the challenges for which solutions are sought reinforce inequity and hierarchy rather than neutralizing sociocultural signals. The significance of shared experiences, academic vocabulary, and value systems in these interactions cannot be overstated. How an instructor designs a course can offer drastically different opportunities for students, especially those from diverse backgrounds, to engage fully in these conversations. The prompts in the discussion posts tend to drift to dominant cultural frameworks, and diverse students may be on the margins, contributing to everyone's learning yet never being able to centre their experiences. In other words, they contribute to vibrant conversations, but their experiences are insufficient to challenge prevailing knowledge frameworks if the instructor does not deliberately seek to do so.

Finally, instructors must be familiar with diverse students' social presence—and absence—in online spaces. Participants actively negotiate their presence in online spaces, and to appear modern, intellectual, and scholarly, these students may present only a part of their identities. Instructors of online learning environments are encouraged to be reflexive in their approaches, engage with diverse student groups, identify their intersectional barriers, and design their courses to meet the needs of all learners.

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