

Understanding inclusivity in online learning from a socio-material lens: the role of care

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Abstract

The global pandemic in 2020 has led to a recent rise of digital technologies in higher education internationally, which seems to make learning less restricted in terms of time and space (Oztok, 2019) and enhance inclusion and engagement in learning. However, it is necessary to distinguish the presence and interaction in online learning from true connectedness and inclusivity. Networked learning, as a concept being constantly explored by a small group of researchers since the 1990s and attracting increasing current attention, is built around the different kinds of connections between students and instructors, as well as human and non-humans (NLEC, 2021). This paper emphasizes the need to be aware of the dimension of connection constructed through the assemblage of humans, materials and discourses. Adopting a socio-material perspective, the assumed high accessibility of online learning and the neo-liberal discourse of a ‘good learner’ are challenged and care is proposed as an approach to improve inclusivity in online learning in higher education. This paper is drawn from the data of a comparative research study that explores the online learning experience of undergraduate students in one case study university in China and the UK respectively. The research consisted of qualitative interviews with students and academics in the case discipline Sociology. The findings suggest a mismatch between students’ and teachers’ perception of what makes effective engagement. Although the teachers recognise certain difficulties in online courses, such as technical issues for organizing small group discussions, arguably the implied neo-liberal message is that hard-working ‘good’ students will always participate, regardless of where or how they learn. However, interviews with students in both contexts show that the specific surroundings in formal and informal educational settings, the interaction and support from peers, and the way their status is recognised in the community concomitantly mediate their experience, in addition to their abilities or motivation. This research contributes by highlighting the potential of emergent forms of networked learning in terms of unveiling the issues of established discourses including neoliberalism. It provides suggestions for future practices by proposing the role of care, supported by the findings, in tackling disengagement and exclusion, and pivoting students around supportive learning. Further, it adopts a socio-material perspective that fills a gap created by the dominance of human-centred research, generating reflections on the use of online materials in higher education.

Keywords

Inclusivity in online learning; socio-material; neoliberalism in online learning; ethics of care

Introduction

The field of networked learning has been emerging since the 1990s with a group of researchers exploring its theories, practices and pedagogies, especially in higher education (NLEC, 2021). An initial definition of it was ‘learning in which information and communications technology (ICT) is used to promote connections: between one learner and other learners, between learners and tutors, between a learning community and its resources (Goodyear et al., 2004, p.1)’. Despite the use of the terms, technology has not been the most important element in understanding of networked learning over the years, rather the way digital technologies are used to enhance connections of different kinds. For example, Dohn et al. (2018) suggest four domains of connections, which are connections between people, connections between situations, the role of ICT on facilitating connections, and connections between humans and non-human actors. While networked learning suggests a focus on the learner, implied by its very name, and explores human agency in social collaborative learning (de Laat and Dohn, 2019),

the socio-material lens is applicable as it traces how human and more-than-human forces assemble in forming connections (NLEC, 2021). It challenges the assumed inherent neutrality of digital technologies and extends the premises of the field to the assemblage of learners, teachers, materials, etc. (Fenwick, 2015). Further, since networked learning is concerned with practices in formal as well as informal settings (de Laat and Dohn, 2019), the socio-material perspective is able to show how networked learning is interwoven with and as part of actors' daily life and prioritising certain groups or behaviour in this process.

Occasioned by the global pandemic in 2020, a variety of digital technologies have gained prevalence in higher education institutions internationally (Tate and Warschauer, 2022). It was acknowledged that the use of these technologies could help with overcoming the hindrance of a space, and improving access to education with lower costs (ibid.). However, as Oztok (2019) argues, networked learning regards learning as engagement in a community. The extent to which students feel connected to each other, to the community and to their surroundings cannot be measured by the number of students owning and using a digital device.

This paper sees networked learning as a process that promotes collaborative and cooperative learning among learners and instructors, between humans, physical spaces and objects, and invisible educational discourses. It draws on the findings from ongoing qualitative comparative research on undergraduates' online learning and engagement in Sociology in case universities from China and the UK. The comparison aims to reveal the possible differences in the way courses are delivered, students are supported and online behaviour promoted in different institutions and cultures, reflecting the influences of established governance, spatial arrangements, materials and discourses and highlighting normalized practices and ideologies that could be overlooked in studies on a single culture. Findings obtained through interviews demonstrate teacher and students' perceptions of online learning and reasons for students' lack of motivation and engagement. Adopting a socio-material perspective, the inherent connectedness and inclusivity of networked learning is challenged, and the role of ethics of care in improving student experience and restoring inclusivity is highlighted, providing suggestions for future practices.

Inclusivity and reproduction of the neoliberal 'good student'

After ethical clearance was obtained, semi-structured interviews with 22 Chinese undergraduates and 5 academics on the Sociology programmes in the UK and Chinese universities were conducted. All students were senior students and experienced online learning in their undergraduate study. The majority of participants expressed the view that online learning was much less productive than face-to-face and they were more likely to 'zone out' behind the muted speaker and black screen. However, while some participants did call themselves 'lazy' or even felt ashamed about it, most of participants suggested it is their interaction with the surrounding environment that played a significant role in mediating their engagement.

One student from the UK university mentioned her experience of having online classes in a café. Once she went to a café to have lectures on Zoom because she could not focus at home, she noticed that most of the customers around her were also students having Zoom lessons. Even if they were not enrolled in the same university, this 'café university' gave her a 'weird sense of community'. This suggests that the perception of a learning space is fluid and emerges through the assemblage of intra-action (Barad, 2003) among students, physical space (classroom, bedroom, etc.), presence of others and materials. Specifically, the enhanced learning motivation in an informal setting such as a café corroborates the findings of Basquill (2014) that the sense of presence of other peers are critical to student's motivation. It can be speculated that through some non-verbal forms of communication (e.g., eye contact) as well as verbal ones (e.g., chatting and confirming student identity), the physical space designated for recreational purposes are reshaped and constructed into a setting for education.

However, the presence of others was not a solution that worked in all scenarios. One participant from the Chinese university described his experience of having online lessons at the lecture room in the campus. At that time the university had not yet sent students home, and instead asked them to wear masks, sit next to each other offline, while teachers were delivering online from home. The student expressed feelings of anger and confusion, stating that he believed the intention was to make students more focused, but the students were annoyed at how they were treated, thus focusing even less. In this example, the students were constantly surrounded by the surveillance of teachers and an atmosphere of seriousness and professionalism conveyed by the lecture room, arguably due to the inherent demand of marketized education to always document, and make visible student actions (Gourlay, 2021). Using digital technologies in this way arguably triggered a students' rebellion that would not normally be seen in face-to-face teaching, where teachers' position in the hierarchical structure may be masked by the physical copresence of teachers and students. In the scenario described by the student the screen between them perhaps

reinforced students' feelings of being patronized and distrusted. Hence, the intention to build an online community offline and to include more students could as well have the opposite effect.

However, when interviewing teachers on the Sociology programme about what they thought of student engagement in online learning, one teacher from China suggested that the student's own dedication and passion for learning were the determining factors in their engagement. She acknowledged the difficulty of organizing interaction and discussion online, but claimed that the 'good students' who actively pursue knowledge were always there, and gave examples of these said students staying in the online classroom for half an hour after the class was over to ask all sorts of questions. This teacher's opinion could be seen to reflect a neoliberal discourse that places the responsibility of proactively engaging and interacting in class on students. This arguably is associated with the notion that students are customers in the wider context of marketized higher education (Barnett, 2013). Nevertheless, MacFarlane (2016) contends that undergraduates are treated worse than customers as members of academic community. Under the implicit presumption that students are novices in the higher education system, the hierarchical structure places them near the receiving end of the chain of making and exercising strategies, and MacFarlane (2016) proposes that this customer mindset requires students to demonstrate 'sanctified' input and outcome in line with the market demands. In this case, the sanctified performance is to constantly show enthusiasm and commitment to interaction.

It is necessary to distinguish supposedly 'active' presence and participation in networked learning via digital technologies from true connectedness and inclusivity. The mechanism of student engagement in networked learning is sometimes criticized as imitating the designs of social media or a game, where instant feedback from teachers is given to reward the 'good' engagement and punish implicitly the 'bad' ones (Decuypere et al., 2021). On the one hand, this does not negate the fact that there are students who are genuinely motivated, or are more interested in certain academic inquiries than their peers. On the other hand, the discourse that constructs a proactive responsible student could be problematic for its neglect of the complexity of how students feel involved and show engagement in online spaces. As the interviews with students unveil, the sense of connection is associated with how individuals perceive their identity and status within a space, constructed through the entanglement of person, location, and community (Fenwick, 2015). Taking a socio-material perspective, it can be argued it is erroneous to assume that personal characteristics are the only variables that determine student engagement. To treat reticent students as 'bad students' could risk unfair exclusion since these students might use silence as a rebellious act in demand for a better learning community, where they could be better supported by peers or treated as equals to their teachers.

Ethics of care

The issue of inclusivity has been identified through analysis of the findings, and this section will discuss how it could be tackled. Tronto (1998) describes ethics of care as both a disposition and awareness of the need for caring and the actual practices people engage in to perform it, with the aim to 'maintain, continue and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible (p. 16).' This is of particular importance to networked learning in higher education today, because it challenges the humanist notion that presumes and values people as autonomous actors, whose learning and engagement completely hinge upon themselves alone, and leads to a recognition of the legitimacy of giving and receiving care. Although there are unavoidable conflicts embedded in intentions and practices of care such as prioritising certain needs while slighting others, and it is not realistic to meet all demands, encouraging the promotion of care could still be valuable because it recognises students as members of the academic community instead of customers passing through the system. One participant from the UK university described her experience of receiving a call from the student wellbeing centre of the university during a lockdown period, asking if everything was alright with her studying remotely. Although no substantial or academic advice was given, the student recalled being touched and stated that this kind of support substantiated her feeling of actually starting a journey as an undergraduate. This is also in line with the literature on relational pedagogy, of which care and inclusivity are two core attributes (Ljungblad, 2019). It argues that teachers who actively engage with students in and beyond lectures support student learning and foster a sense of belonging (Bell, 2022).

However, caring is never simple as it often involves power relations. A caring process is often initiated by a caregiver who has more knowledge than the receiver, and the receiver may feel frustrated at being watched for its implication of incompetence and immaturity, as the example of online lessons in offline settings indicates. This could create new exclusion instead of improving inclusivity. Moreover, the power struggle does not only exist between humans, but also extends to everything perceived in the 'gathering' or 'collective' of learning (Puig de

la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 33). Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) delineates the concept of ‘matters of concern’, which resists the assumption of inherent control of humans over tools, and examines the way in which nonhumans or matters are represented and embodied. This is shown in the way that a café with distracting noises could in fact make students concentrate, while a silent classroom might undermine students’ motivation. This suggests that learning does not float or distinct from how the learning materials and spaces are organized, rather it is mediated by students’ interaction with them and the sense of trust, autonomy and connection built in the interaction. Decentering the agency from humans, this advocates educational practitioners’ constant attention to the handling, maintenance and possible adjustment of the digital and non-digital facilitators of learning, considering not only efficiency and practicality but also how they shape and are shaped by humans.

Conclusion

This paper challenges the assumed wide inclusion of online learning and rejects the idea that students who do not seem to be active in community are simply ‘lazy’, taking a socio-material lens. It argues for an alternative perspective that uses the concept of care to reconstruct the relationship between students, teachers, and assemblages of surroundings to build connections. It contributes by providing implications for how higher education institutions and educators could enhance inclusivity in networked learning, which is through examining the nuanced relationship between learners’ status as legitimate members of a community and the way they are treated by others and placed in various physical and discursive settings. While it is difficult to care about everyone in all universities, this research underscores its potential to improve inclusivity and future research could investigate how caring practices of individuals and materials could be done in specific settings.

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