

'Good students will always be active': Understanding inclusivity in online learning from a socio-material lens

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Abstract

This research explores undergraduate students' experiences and engagement in online learning in a Chinese and UK university respectively through a comparative lens. Through semi-structured interviews with undergraduates and academics, this study investigates potential factors that mediate student's engagement from different perspectives, distinguishing presence and interaction in online learning from genuine connectedness and inclusivity. Adopting a socio-material lens, the role played by the assemblage of peers, teachers, materials, spaces, and discourses in student's engagement is highlighted, challenging interviewed teachers' perceptions that students' learning experience depends solely on their own motivation and ability. Recognising the nuanced networks of actors in learning, this research contributes by proposing the role of care to address disengagement, extending traditional caring practices between human agents to encompass the daily maintenance and handling of spaces and objects that constitute the learning environment. Further, this research seeks to contribute to the use of socio-materiality in future educational research.

Full paper

The global pandemic in 2020 led to numerous higher education institutions transitioning to online learning, accompanied by a recent rise of digital technologies in universities internationally. This trend seems to make learning less restricted in terms of time and space (Oztok, 2019) and enhance inclusion and engagement in learning (Tate and Warschauer, 2022; Decuypere et al., 2021). However, it is necessary to distinguish the presence and interaction in online learning from true connectedness and inclusivity.

My research is 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 semi-structured interviews with both students and academics in the case discipline Sociology to obtain a comprehensive view of student engagement and the factors associated with it. The findings suggest a mismatch between students' and teachers' perception of what makes effective engagement. Although the teachers recognize 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 (Wut and Xu, 2021), and the surveillance adopted to monitor them (Gourlay, 2022) concomitantly mediate their experience and perceived status in the community, in addition to their abilities or motivation.

Adopting a socio-material perspective (Fenwick, 2015), this research contributes by highlighting the dimension of connection constructed through the assemblage of humans, materials and discourses and unveiling issues of certain established discourses including neoliberalism. The assumed high accessibility of online learning is challenged, and this research provides suggestions for future practices by proposing ethics of care (Tronto, 1998; Ljungblad, 2019), supported by the findings, as an approach to tackling disengagement and exclusion, and pivoting students around supportive learning. Further, beyond caring practices between human agents, constant handling, maintenance and possible adjustment of the digital and non-digital facilitators of learning is advocated (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017), considering how they could shape inclusivity and student experience in higher education.

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