Inclusive Online Teaching and Digital Learning: Lessons Learned in the Time of Pandemic and Beyond

When the COVID-19 pandemic swept across the world in 2020 and into 2021, the entire system of education faced the most challenging task to provide education to students using virtual instruction. Within the United States specifically, the pandemic transformed teaching. Teachers were and have continued to be compelled to learn digital technology and integrate varied digital tools into their instruction. As guest editors, Eric and I had the opportunity to reflect on the many instructional challenges and valuable lessons learned about virtual teaching and learning in k-12 and higher education. One of the biggest lessons observed was exposure of huge equity gaps between the tech haves and have nots, regarding access to digital devices and reliable Wi-Fi. It was from this observation that the call for proposals of this special issue was developed. What does inclusion look like in the era of digital and virtual teaching? With this in mind, we were tasked to coedit this special issue of JCSR focusing on the theme "Inclusive Curriculum in the Era of Digital & Virtual Learning." We had the opportunity to review five exemplary articles responding to the theme.

We define an inclusive curriculum as the commitment toward attaining social justice and equity in teaching and learning. It is our vision and desire to develop and foster curricula that challenge and dismantle structural and systemic issues (e.g., racism, ableism, sexism, classism, linguicism, ageism, heterosexism, religious bias, and xenophobia) that our global society currently faces.

This special issue represents a crucial time to understand the intersection of technology, pedagogy, and education within inclusive teaching. The five articles represent diverse perspectives on the migration toward online/virtual teaching, especially in the time of pandemic. The articles published contain a range of contexts, use differing methodologies, and focus on various experiences from students, pre-service teachers, to communities at large.

Three broad themes are evident across the articles in this special issue: insight into how and why to use online spaces for Anti-Racist work, challenges experienced with digital and virtual learning, and meaning making in online spaces. Each theme offers unique insight into the interpretation of the call and gives depth to what inclusive digital learning and teaching could and should look like.

The articles "Towards Abolition: Undoing the Colonized Curriculum" (by Angela Maria Leslie, Vajra Watson, Rose Borunda, Kate Bosworth and Tatianna Grant) and "Towards Socially Just Literacy Teaching in Virtual Spaces" (by Elizabeth Isidro and Laura Teichert) depict the development of creating anti-racist spaces online. As editors we recognize that spaces designed by predominantly white instructors must be actively anti-racist to move away from a digital environment of neutrality, and the submitted works reflect anti-racist teaching and learning efforts in primary, secondary, and higher education.

In reviewing these two works, both call for de-colonizing the current curriculum in schools. However, each paper espouses challenges in attempting to build anti-racist curriculum in online spaces. "Towards Socially Just Literacy Teaching in Virtual Spaces" examines an online literacy methods course and the pedagogy of teaching literacy virtually. However, what was uncovered by the authors in data collection is that creating socially just teaching strategies and literacy instruction in virtual spaces is a complex process. Accordingly, "Towards Abolition: Undoing the Colonized Curriculum" expands on this complex process by exploring the impact of an online humanist pedagogy on students' understanding of radicalized power. We appreciate the data analyzed, as it engages inclusive digital spaces through a social justice lens.

The three articles "Lessons Learned from a Rural Classroom Study: Transitioning from Concrete to Virtual Manipulatives to Teach Math Fact Fluency to Students with Learning Disabilities" (by Matthew Kabel, Jiyung Hwang and Jiwon Hwang), "Community Making: An Expansive View of Curriculum" (by Jill Castek) "Digital Storytelling as a Tool for Reflection in Virtual Reality Projects" (by Deoksoon Kim, Merijke Coenraad and Ho Ryong Park) offers further insight into the presence of inequity in digital spaces. These articles depicted a variety of challenges that have been made clear, including equitable spaces and mental health support.

What was quite notable across all three of the articles is description of teachers', students', and pre-service teachers' perception of using technology as a primary tool for pedagogical use. Many described the heightened level of anxiety experienced when integrating new tools into the classroom, especially during pandemic when the transition was forced, and students/teachers alike were forced to adapt quickly. Although these articles depicted the natural resiliency educators and students have amidst times of uncertainty, the pandemic also exposed large gaps of inequality.

Creating accessible spaces for online learning has proved challenging due to the digital divide that prevents equitable access to online spaces. "Lessons Learned from a Rural Classroom Study: Transitioning from Concrete to Virtual Manipulatives to Teach Math Fact Fluency to Students with Learning Disabilities'' describes the challenges experienced when virtually teaching in the context of a rural classroom. In their research, Matthew Kabel, Jiyung Hwang and Jiwon Hwang attempt to create an inclusive mathematics classroom using virtual manipulatives but discovers that the accessibility, implementation, and resource of virtual learning is lacking in rural communities.

Engaging in inclusive digital teaching and learning has presented its own unique challenges in pandemic, but also opportunities that may bring clarity, and offer meaning to teachers and students. The articles "Community Making: An Expansive View of Curriculum" and "Digital Storytelling as a Tool for Reflection in Virtual Reality Projects" depicts this reflection and meaning making amidst challenge.

Meaning-making positions human beings as agents of personal and collective change, as depicted in "Community Making: An Expansive View of Curriculum" by Jill Castek. The author offered a unique perspective on the need for community and critical relationality in times of trial- including the context of pandemic. By promoting reflection, safety, and inclusion- the authors found that the community under study could more easily transition into online communities of care. Like Jill Castek, in "Digital Storytelling as a Tool for Reflection in Virtual Reality Projects" Deoksoon Kim, Merijke Coenraad and Ho Ryong Park integrated reflection using digital storytelling for the promotion of identity building and learning. Meaning making and reflection provide a depth of hope in virtual learning spaces- that are so needed in the time of COVID-19.

The articles contained in this special issue offer a wide perspective and definition on inclusive digital curriculum. It is our hope that the insight offered in this collection of manuscripts will help inform K-12 teachers and teacher educators in best practices of digital learning. Further, we hope that this work will inspire future research centered in equitable virtual learning.

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