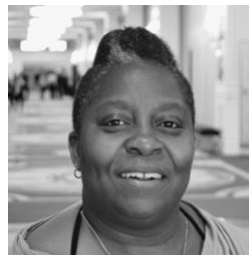
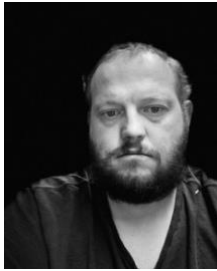


The path towards a socially just learning design *by Keith Heggart, Camille Dickson-Deane, and Karen Novak*



Introduction

Ensuring that our education practice is socially just is a challenging prospect at any time; when confronted with the current challenges of unprecedented bushfires and a global pandemic, it can seem an almost impossible consideration - yet perhaps it has never been more important to design learning to be socially just in the midst of these challenges. Before discussing how to design in a 'socially just' way, it would be pertinent to provide a definition: social justice is a concept which describes the relationships between an individual and society. It proposes that these relationships be fair and just behaviours as measured by choice, distribution, opportunities, privileges, indeed, any form of activity (Boyles, Carusi and Attick, 2009). When addressing these behaviours from a learning design perspective, this suggests we need to consider how we design our learning and teaching strategies. By designing these interventions carefully we can narrow educational inequalities and thus ensure a socially just education for all.

What is socially just learning design?

The first, and most important point, is that any approach to learning design that claims to be socially just needs to be inclusionary more than exclusionary. Too often, conversations about ensuring learning and teaching is socially just become too narrow, focusing on the needs of one particular group over another. While meeting the needs of marginalised learners is important, specifically focusing on one group in such a narrow way ignores the compounding challenges presented by the intersectional nature of disadvantages (Crenshaw, 2017), as well as risking marginalizing other groups. This approach is in keeping with definitions like that proposed by Clare Hocking, who argues that a truly socially just education is one that 'embraces a wide range of differences and explores their effects on individual learning' (Hocking, 2010: p2) - basically a positive acknowledgement of individual differences (Cronbach and Snow, 1969; Jonassen and Grabowski, 1993).

Instead of focusing on a particular group within a class as the site for improving learning outcomes, it is possible instead to focus on the learning experience as a whole, and in doing so make it an accessible and fulfilling experience for all learners. This is the kind of approach advocated in Universal Design for Learning or UDL (Meyer, Rose and Gordon, 2014). UDL is drawn from the broader ideas in architecture which calls for a shift from focusing on the deficits of individuals, and instead arguing that the deficit lies within society, and that is where we should focus our efforts. In the education context, this means that, regardless of a learner's characteristics, once they are registered to pursue a course or program, the learning content should have relevance to the learner's disposition within society. Not considering how the learner will integrate any learnings into their own experience world is counterproductive.

There are additional benefits to such an approach to learning: by designing learning experience with this level of inclusivity, we meet the needs of all learners, but also allow a greater degree of flexibility and choice within learning – and that leads to greater learner engagement with the material. For example, one of the principles of UDL calls for providing multiple means of representation. In terms of video content, this might include providing captions, and an audio only version, and also a transcript

as well as the video content. While the audio only content might be of value to visually impaired learners, it might also be of value to learners who want to listen to the material while driving, or exercising. Equally, the captions might be of value to hearing impaired learners, but also to those where English language is not their first language.

Interactivity ... what it means to me (the learner)

Another key principle behind UDL relates to providing multiple means of engagement for all learners. One way of doing this is by providing opportunities for students to demonstrate their interpretation through interactions. While this can be seen as a relatively straightforward pedagogical activity (although one that must still be carefully planned), instructors can be myopic in fully comprehending how this can be actioned. Most instructors adhere to their own somewhat accidentally developed pedagogical practice and are apprehensive about change. Adjusting a pedagogical approach to one where all learners are acknowledged and given the opportunity to respond can be difficult especially when looking at different modes of delivery.

We are still developing an understanding of interactivity in the online space – especially in terms of new secondary school learners and their engagement with different learning materials. This group, in particular, has grown up with digital and mobile technologies, and hence has different expectations about interactivity from previous cohorts. In trying to engender interactivity which demonstrates active learning, institutions often allow users to do relatively simple things: liking a post, for example, or commenting on an article. These are both examples of so-called ‘interactive’ elements that are often utilised by instructors within learning management systems. While they have a place, these are often not what learners today consider to be ‘interactive’ and perhaps do little to boost engagement with learning materials.

Instead, learners are more likely to consider interactivity as something that affords them an element of control over the resources at hand. A good framework to understand this level of control is David Wiley’s 5Rs of Open Education Infrastructure. Wiley (2014) suggests that there are five key elements in how technology can be used in this way. Students can

1. Retain material: make, own, and control a copy of the resource (eg, download and keep your own copy)
2. Revise material: edit, adapt, and modify your copy of the resource (e.g., translate into another language)
3. Remix material: combine an original or revised copy of the resource with other existing material to create something new (eg, make a mashup)
4. Reuse material: use your original, revised, or remixed copy of the resource publicly (eg, on a website, in a presentation, in a class)
5. Redistribute material: share copies of your original, revised, or remixed copy of the resource with others (eg, post a copy online or give one to a friend)

While these might not all be possible within the proprietary constraints of an institutions learning management systems, some of them should be – for example, students are more than capable of sharing work they’ve created more widely than within the class, and they are also capable of contributing to co-created resources, or being actively included as prosumers rather than only consuming pre-created materials (de Alvarez and Dickson-Deane, 2018).

Bringing it all together

What does this mean for socially just learning design? Perhaps not surprisingly, Wiley’s ideas about open educational resources bear some similarity to Nancy Fraser’s (2007) three dimensional theory

of social justice education. In even more 'R's, Fraser suggests that socially just education can be enacted through redistribution (increasing access to education for all), recognition (by reconsidering what is taught) and representation (developing authentic partnerships between students and teachers in decision-making processes). Combining these ideas with the principles of UDL, it is possible to develop a framework for socially just learning design (Figure 1).

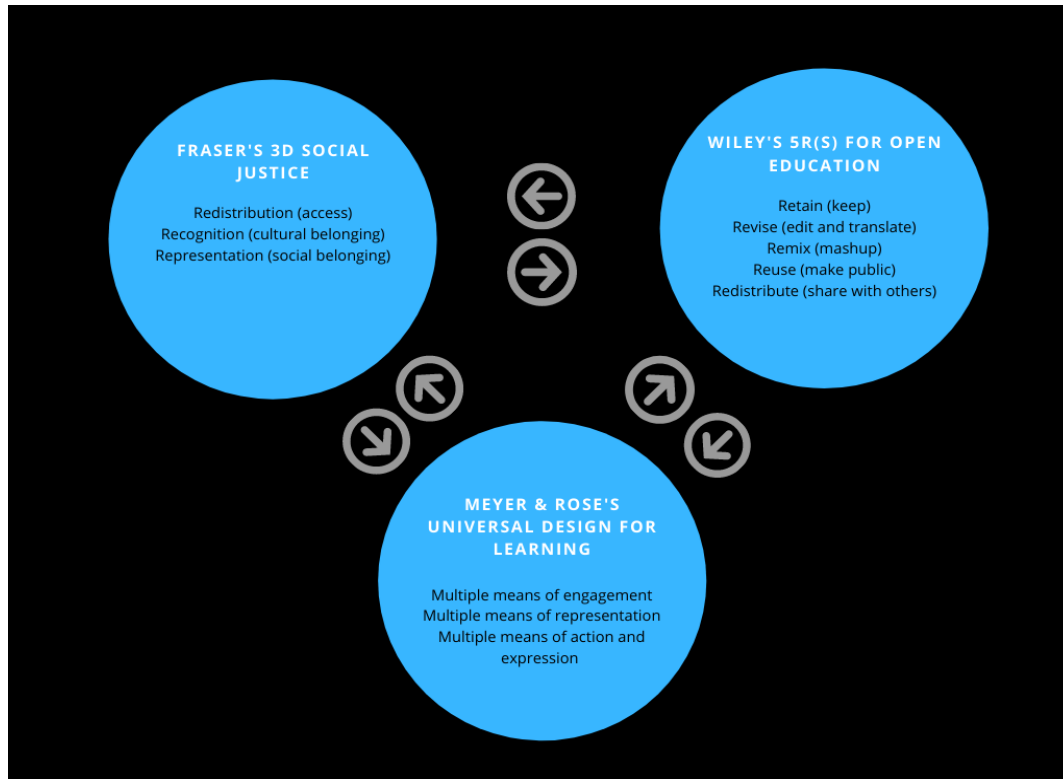


Figure 1: Framework for socially just learning design activities

The examples below explain how such a framework might be operationalised.

1. *Creating relevance by adding context to an existing OER*

It's common practice for students to be assigned a particular textbook as part of any course. Related to or based upon their reading of this textbook (and other activities as part of the course) students complete some form of summative assessment, often in the form of a written essay or report. However, using the framework above, it's possible to make this activity both more engaging and more socially just. For example, by allowing the students to contribute or create an open source textbook on the topic, the task is automatically more authentic (as it's a real world problem) and the future course materials are more representative towards the specific needs of the learner, their cohort and their immediate interaction within their societal base.

2. *Adjusting rubrics to accommodate for any media-delivery*

Another way of ensuring more socially-just approaches of learning design is by assessing student responses based on the communication of the assessment content and not on the foundational base of medium in which assessed content is delivered. Whilst this can be difficult for some course content, if we restrict students to only provide responses to learning objectives within one medium this actively creates hurdles for students. If understanding of the content is what matters, then allow them to communicate it in the best way they know how. We can develop the above example about contributing to a textbook further: by allowing students to submit a different form of assessment (a short video, a webpage, an interactive learning object), it is also possible to allow students to make

use of multiple means of expression. In this way, we have allowed greater representation, more means of expression, and made use of the revise and redistribute principles from Wiley (2014).

3. Giving learners choices in assessments

Learners have to manage their times differently. Either redesigning assessments that can provide the opportunity to students to be selective in submission (phased submission in parts or delivery all at once) or a choice of three out of five assessments to complete allows learners to regain control of their own learning and customise it to themselves whilst still adhering to course intended outcomes. Focusing the assessment to all students to fully access the disciplinary knowledge within their own context allows for redistribution of relevant and vital knowledge (Fraser, 2007).

Conclusion

In short, socially just learning design has significant potential to improve outcomes - not just for students in marginalised groups, but for all students. By combining Fraser's 3D social justice model with aspects of UDL and the 5 R's for Open Education into a cohesive framework, it is possible to design learning in such a way that all students have the opportunity and resources required to succeed.

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