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# Reframing designs for learning in context: culturally-situated and social justice research approaches in the learning and information sciences

Guest editorial

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This special issue on culturally-situated and social justice research comes to the fore at a time of great global and national uncertainty. It was proposed and launched in early 2019, yet, during this contemporary health and social crisis – and in the face of an international pandemic of proportions not experienced in our lifetimes – there has never been more local and global attention shone on the social, cultural and economic inequities at the core of its central themes. The ramifications of social injustice have had measurable and consequential results for many internationally and in North America, with “income inequality [. . .] at a level not seen since 1928,” anxiety and depression at “epidemic proportions” and “homelessness in the United States and Canada. . . declared a national emergency” (Thrift and Sugarman, 2019, pp. 3-4).

Simultaneously, social justice movements, which have grown in strength and numbers in the past decade with the rise of social media and growing inequities, have accelerated around injustices made more visible during the pandemic and the looming United States presidential election. The reinvigoration of the Black Lives Matter movement during the global health crisis was both a response to disproportionate police violence against Black communities and other racially and ethnically minoritized communities (Dave *et al.*, 2020; Eligon, 2020), and broader grievances and recognition of economic and racial inequities and health disparities that disproportionately affect people of color – who are overrepresented amongst the essential workforce – during the pandemic (Elbaum, 2020). The new wave of protests also heightened calls for awareness around institutional and structural inequities, prompting strikes by scientists and academics on June 10, 2020, using the Twitter hashtags #ShutDownSTEM and #ShutDownAcademia to raise awareness of systemic biases faced by minoritized scholars generally, and Black scholars in particular (Gwynne and Durrani, 2020).

Social justice and critical engagement in culturally-situated learning have become especially important in recent years when international relationships and civic and political involvement with information have been affected by social media and emerging technologies. Digital spaces have invited not only new cultures of online consumption and production but also new forms of activism (Jenkins, 2012; Kligler-Vilenchik *et al.*, 2012; Stornaiuolo and Thomas, 2017). Fan activism – or activism around shared media content – can provide a “powerful training ground for future activists and community organizers” (Jenkins, 2012, Section 2.6). However, the digital media landscape can also be tenuous for resistance, which can open up minoritized and marginalized groups to discrimination, bullying and violence (Love and Bradley, 2015; Kafai *et al.*, 2016; Stornaiuolo and Thomas, 2017). For instance, the last wave of digital equity-oriented social justice activism (between 2012–2016) brought with it a growing backlash from which alt-right extremism and white nationalism grew in strength and numbers (Ebner, 2020; Salter, 2017), often leveraging online fandom, social media and gaming as sites for recruitment and organizing (Donovan, 2019; Richard and Gray, 2018).



Though social and cultural realities are at the crux of our everyday lived experiences, within many social science fields, including the learning and information sciences, the scope of investigation often glosses over these complexities. Some scholars have pointed out that a lack of historical understanding and consensus around core aspects of social justice (Thrift and Sugarman, 2019) along with the lack of integration of multicultural and critical pedagogies (Nieto, 1995) have hampered deep, meaningful and nuanced research and practice. Thrift and Sugarman (2019), for example, critique the individual-oriented, deficit approach of most psychological research focused on social justice as an outgrowth of this lack of consensus:

“A widespread error in psychology is that failing to recognize the constitutive force of our sociopolitical and economic institutions has led to fixing features of persons to human nature rather than to the institutions within which they become persons. . . This error perpetuates the interpretation of social justice in individual terms, aligning psychologists with the neoliberal agenda” (p. 13).

Nieto (1995) and Gay (1995) underscore the symbiotic relationship between multicultural education and critical pedagogy, which have influenced each other in ways that have widened and deepened scholarly and social conceptions of race, class and gender. This body of related scholarship signals the importance of understanding and integrating sociocultural and historical framing to best capture, analyze, nuance and extend our knowledge around learning, engagement, context and complexity.

More recently, in the learning sciences, scholars have called for more attention to the critical role that social experiences and identities play in learning and engagement in formal and informal education. For example, a recent review article by the outgoing editors of *The Journal of the Learning Sciences* (Radinsky and Tabak, 2017) cited the following areas as having received increased attention: “social justice as a context of learning,” gendered and racialized experiences and identities (Langer-Osuna, 2015), socioeconomic inequities (Conner, 2014; Esmonde, 2014) and learning through social justice movements (Jurow and Shea, 2015). Moreover, critical scholarship on racialized and gendered design practices in industry and academia has propelled greater attention to the design of technologies for widespread meaning making and information seeking (Kafai *et al.*, 2016; Noble, 2018; Noble and Tynes, 2016; Richard and Gray, 2018) and youth and adult content creation (Richard, 2017; Richard and Kafai, 2016). Furthermore, related fields like educational psychology, have started to formally integrate anti-deficit approaches that seek to reframe how researchers holistically approach, contextualize, center and measure minoritized groups by employing race-focused and race-reimagined framing (DeCuir-Gunby and Schutz, 2014).

This volume’s contributions respond to this call for culturally situated and social justice research and provide important ecological and multi-level considerations for research and practice in the information and learning sciences. Each paper addresses different contours around the overarching theme, describing emerging areas of inquiry, design and practice in formal, informal and interest-driven learning contexts and offering critical and deep engagement with opportunities and challenges for the interrelated fields.

The first paper in this special issue, authored by Jurow and Freeman, situates, operationalizes and interrogates historical and contextual intentionality in designs for equity by providing a design narrative of a social design experiment in a teacher education program aimed at educators that work with learners from historically marginalized groups. The authors describe the ideational, relational and material aspects of the approach, providing a rich account of the learning opportunities and tensions as shaped by the current sociocultural and political climate along with the activities, context and participants.

Next, Curnow and Vea center and examine the role of emotions in learning and social justice participation. The authors tie together two complex case studies of political groups, and explore central themes that emerge around emotions and individual and interdependent

dimensions of activism. They argue that emotions and politics are tightly connected, with emotions often shaping and affecting political viewpoints. They assert that understanding these individual and shared connections and complexities are critical for discerning how social justice is perceived and practiced by individuals and groups.

In the third article, Neri invites deeper reflection on the socioculturally-situated “funds of knowledge” (González *et al.*, 2006) youth leverage in their meaning making and how critical consciousness may shape youth learning, engagement and systematic understanding of complex structural inequities at the core of their everyday experiences. Through analysis of a two-year Youth Participatory Action Research project focused on preparing young learners for police-oriented careers, Neri explores the importance of helping youth integrate their difficult lived experiences (e.g. racial trauma, crime, addiction) into their learning experiences. She argues that addressing these *difficult funds of knowledge* supports the development of critical consciousness and reconciles deficit orientations, including negative self- and community assessments that mediate youth learning.

The fourth paper, authored by Litts, Tehee, Baggaley, Jenkins, Hamilton and Yan, describes and critically assesses a culturally-situated research-practice partnership aimed at sixth grade educators who work with Indigenous learners by operationalizing a culturally disruptive pedagogical approach. The cases outlined illustrate and interrogate levels of engagement, tensions, reflections and discoveries across the diverse group of Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers, designers and educators. The authors provide a framework for conducting culturally disruptive inquiry, and findings underscore opportunities and limitations for culturally-situated research-practice partnerships.

Rounding out the contributions, Champion, Tucker-Raymond, Millner, Wright, Gravel, Likely, Allen-Handy and Dandridge present findings from a hip hop, STEM and computing camp for middle school youth. Their analysis of the experience of four black girls in the program supports the potential benefits of culturally sustaining computing pedagogies. Findings from this innovative STEM learning and making activity point to ways learning ecologies can be established to not only invite participation by historically marginalized groups but also widen general conceptions about computational practices, such as by encouraging approaches influenced by hip hop culture, and supporting embodied engagement.

In conclusion, the articles consider contemporary and emerging approaches to engaging with issues of equity, diversity, culture and social justice in research, practice and designs for learning for a variety of learners across the lifespan and across learning contexts. Taken as a whole, they invite the information sciences and learning sciences fields to consider how sociocultural and sociohistorical complexities and individual, collective and macro-level dimensions in learners’, educators’ and researchers’ everyday lives permeate and shape all aspects of research and practice. We hope this special issue will add to ongoing conversations about the importance of culture and social justice in the field, and, in particular, provoke, disrupt, enrichen and extend nuanced, ecological and multilevel inquiry and designs for learning.

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