

SOCIOCULTURAL PEDAGOGY AND DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION BEYOND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

This article draws attention to the need for a structured sociocultural pedagogical model supported by a novel digital education platform to meet the needs of Millennials and Generation Z in higher-education. Historically, early-career educators entering higher education develop teaching- and assessment practices based on inherited work routines and course structures. This is often due to a lack of newcomers experience and time, and because of established educators lacking trust in newcomers (Black & Garvis, 2018). Early-career educators are influenced by established academic cultures and school leadership (Day & Leithwood, 2007; Day et al., 2010).

Cultures of reproduction tend to inhibit pedagogical renewal rather than being attuned ongoing social developments and digital transformations in society. Societal advances and the COVID-19 pandemic have accelerated the digital transformation of higher education and shown a need to go beyond existing teacher- and learner-centered approaches to supplement face-to-face instruction.

For decades, teacher- and learner-centered approaches have been prevalent in higher education (Duckworth, 2009). The former is often characterized by direct instruction with teachers as authorities and students as passive receivers of information. In the latter, teachers are still considered authorities, but they and students have a more active role in learning activities (Wright, 2011). Over time, the teacher-centered approach has largely been replaced by the learner-centered approach in Western societies (Lasry, Charles, & Whittaker, 2014; Schreurs & Dumbraveanu, 2014), but not everywhere. While research has shown that the learner-centered approach leads to higher quality learning (Gillies, 2016), drawbacks include (Mascolo, 2009, p. 7): promotion of active student engagement at the expense of active teaching; prioritization of individual experience over linguistically mediated cultural knowledge in the development of higher-order knowledge and; confusion between desired outcomes of education and developmental processes that lead to those outcomes.

A third alternative—the sociocultural approach—systematized by Vygotsky (Vygotsky, 1978, 1987) and reconceptualized by, for example, Bruner (Bruner, 1960, 1978) and Rogoff (Rogoff, 1993, 2003, 2008), remains to be broadly adopted and evaluated in the context of higher education. The sociocultural approach has several strengths: teaching and learning occur in a context of structured activities that recognize the value of higher-order knowledge and skills (Brookhart, 2010; Mascolo, 2009); it does not regard individuals as isolated entities but focuses instead on the dynamic “interdependence between individual and social processes in the construction of knowledge” (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996, p. 192); it is responsive to individual differences within a culture and cross-

culturally—the approach recognizes that different social, cultural, and historical interactions inspire individuals to explore different learning routes (Miller, 2011); finally, the point of departure in the sociocultural approach is that development is not driven by the expected learning curve, but by learning itself (Miller, 2011).

While previous research has demonstrated the usefulness of a sociocultural approach in educational contexts, it has often had too-narrow a focus (Alfred, 2009; Faraon, Rönkkö, Wiberg, & Ramberg, 2020; Lasky, 2005; Wang, Bruce, & Hughes, 2011). Compared to the teacher- and learner-centered approaches, the adoption of a sociocultural approach in higher education is limited. Some reasons for this are identified so far: “changes in practice by professors, and these changes are also very susceptible to the organizational requirements of each institution” (Barrette, 2009, p. 20) and; a lack of customizable digital education platforms designed for Millennials and Generation Z (Dimock, 2019) from different cultures and academic backgrounds that educators use to deliver “an experience allowing for egalitarian communication and easy sharing of content in familiar digital interfaces” (Ross, 2019, p. 91).

There is thus good reason to explore, design, and evaluate a structured sociocultural pedagogical model that adopts an integrative approach and is responsive to different cultures, subjects, digital tools, and societal concerns. This article suggests that such a model should incorporate the following: (1) Social, cultural, and historical interactions inspiring individuals to explore different learning routes; (2) sensitivity of individual differences within and across cultures; (3) a dynamic interdependence between individuals and social processes in knowledge-construction; and (4) a view of learning as the vehicle driving development, rather than being determined by the expected learning curve.

A structured sociocultural pedagogical model needs a supporting digital education platform. Existing digital education platforms, or learning management systems (LMSs) (e.g., Moodle, Blackboard, Canvas, ItsLearning), together with communication platforms (e.g., Zoom, Microsoft Teams), have played an essential role in higher education during the pandemic. Despite their usefulness, LMSs are largely instructor-centric, inefficient in presenting course materials or establishing student contact (Ross, 2019), and have been experienced as demotivating by both learners (Strauss & Hill, 2007) and educators (Schoonenboom, 2014).

Millennials and Generation Z have already turned to digital communication platforms for business (e.g., Slack, Discord, TeamSpeak) (Ross, 2019). These platforms have transformed their expectations regarding how and with which tools to communicate online. The mentioned platforms integrate social features, characteristics, and functionalities that facilitate synchronous as well as asynchronous collaboration, co-creation, and a sense of community, which is often missing in contemporary LMSs. In addition, the emergence of digital cultures in online multiplayer games have shown a potential to inspire collaboration, curiosity, and commitment (King & de la Hera, 2020); which could be used as inspiration when developing a digital education platform.

In an attempt to respond to such expectations, brands and organizations have turned to social media to interact and build informal relationships. In this regard, Generation Z is considered a powerful force for social change to challenge both political institutions and governments

(Reinikainen, Kari, & Luoma-aho, 2020). Nevertheless, higher education persists in educating predominantly using educational platforms that do not connect with these groups' needs.

In order to design a future digital education platform, the process needs to consider diverse methods and take a participatory bottom-up approach to include educators and learners from different cultures and strata so as to capture a range of competencies and experiences. Developing a structured sociocultural pedagogical model supported by a novel digital education platform has the potential to strengthen the cooperation and mobility of educators and learners in higher education.

Keywords: sociocultural pedagogy, digital platform, higher education, educators, learners, COVID-19

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