



Teaching and Learning for Social Justice and Equity in Higher Education

Virtual Settings

Edited by
Laura Parson · C. Casey Ozaki

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Editors

Laura Parson
North Dakota State University
Fargo, ND, USA

C. Casey Ozaki
University of North Dakota
Grand Forks, ND, USA

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LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

North Dakota State Land Acknowledgment: We collectively acknowledge that we gather at NDSU, a land grant institution, on the traditional lands of the Oceti Sakowin (Dakota, Lakota, Nakoda) and Anishinaabe Peoples in addition to many diverse Indigenous Peoples still connected to these lands. We honor with gratitude Mother Earth and the Indigenous Peoples who have walked with her throughout generations. We will continue to learn how to live in unity with Mother Earth and build strong, mutually beneficial, trusting relationships with Indigenous Peoples of our region.

University of North Dakota Land Acknowledgment: Today, the University of North Dakota rests on the ancestral lands of the Pembina and Red Lake Bands of Ojibwe and the Dakota Oyate—presently existing as composite parts of the Red Lake, Turtle Mountain, White Earth Bands, and the Dakota Tribes of Minnesota and North Dakota. We acknowledge the people who resided here for generations and recognize that the spirit of the Ojibwe and Oyate people permeates this land. As a university community, we will continue to build upon our relations with the First Nations of the State of North Dakota—the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara Nation, Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate Nation, Spirit Lake Nation, Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, and Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians.

In acknowledging the land on which our respective institutions reside, we do not suggest that we have assuaged our need to do constant, continuous work to decolonize higher education. We are committed

to affecting change by putting the words of these land acknowledgments into action in our words, praxis, and syllabi. In acknowledging the land we work and reside within and the Indigenous peoples connected to it, we also acknowledge the legacy of settler colonization and the reality of its impacts on Indigenous peoples, past and present. We commit to continued learning as well as holding ourselves and our institutions accountable.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Candice Bocala, Ph.D. (she/her/hers) is a Lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE). Her research focuses on the connections between educator learning and organizational conditions that support collaborative work. She is also committed to supporting educators with understanding issues related to racial or ethnic diversity and enacting pedagogical practices that promote equity in schools. At HGSE, she is the former faculty director of Reimagining Integration: Diverse and Equitable Schools (RIDES) and is the research director of the Data Wise Project. Bocala began her career as an elementary school teacher in Washington, D.C., and she was also a senior research associate at West Ed. Bocala received her Ed.D. from the Harvard Graduate School of Education, an M.A.T. in elementary education from American University, an M.A. in policy analysis and evaluation from Stanford University, and a B.A. in government from Cornell University.

Shihua Brazill (she/her/hers) is an Instructional Designer for the Center for Faculty Excellence and a Ph.D. student in Adult and Higher Education at Montana State University. She has taught the Multicultural Education course face-to-face and online. She holds a graduate certificate in College and University Teaching from MSU and won the prestigious P.E.O. Scholar Award in 2020. She earned an MS in Technical Communication at Montana Tech where she taught undergraduate and graduate courses. Her current research examines higher education outcomes and

academic experiences of minoritized students. Her multicultural experiences have shaped her research goals to build a more just society through improved educational success for diverse students and helping dominant groups practice multicultural inclusion. Her publications and presentations include sole-authorships and co-authorships with colleagues. She has published on translation studies, multicultural education, diversity and identity in E-learning, curriculum design, inclusive education, web-based pedagogy, and graduate students' socialization experiences.

Virginia Clinton-Lisell, Ph.D. (she/her/hers) is an Associate Professor in Educational Foundations and Research at the University of North Dakota. She holds a masters' degree in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages from New York University and a doctorate in Educational Psychology from the University of Minnesota. Dr. Clinton-Lisell's research focuses on the psychology of language, open educational resources, and student attitudes toward active learning.

Alyson Froehlich, Ph.D. (she/her/hers) is a Teacher and scholar interested in how people learn about and perceive the world around them. She received her Ph.D. in Cognitive Neuroscience Psychology at the University of Utah. She spent 8 years researching cognition and neural development in autism. She is currently an Assistant Professor (Lecturer) in the Department of Psychology at the University of Utah and a Higher Education Instructional Consultant for the university's Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence. She is also an Adjunct Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Maryland Global Campus. In her free time she enjoys hiking, camping, traveling, and being outside with her dog and family.

Staci Gilpin, Ph.D. (she/her/hers) is an Assistant Professor in the School of Education and Social Work at The College of St. Scholastica and a Ph.D. Student in Educational Foundations and Research at the University of North Dakota. She teaches and designs graduate and undergraduate courses using multiple delivery methods to include face-to-face, hybrid, and online. Before moving into higher education, Staci worked in both urban and rural K-12 schools for nearly 20 years as a teacher for students with emotional/behavioral disabilities, elementary classroom teacher, instructional coach, and special education administrator. She is an advocate for quality online instruction as an avenue to provide access to higher education for students who live in rural areas, historically

underrepresented communities, and to address teacher shortages. Staci's research utilizes quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods designs with social justice and equity lens to study the scholarship of teaching and learning, online learning, open educational resources, and teacher preparation. She presents at the Online Learning Consortium (OLC), OpenEd, and AERA National Conferences. Staci also recently published a model of persistence for online learners and she is a 2020–2021 William and Flora Hewlett Foundation Open Educational Resources Fellow.

Matthew A. Gonzales (he/him/his) was born in Houston, TX. In 2018, he earned his Bachelor of Arts with Paideia Scholar Distinction in Psychology from Southwestern University, where he also had the opportunity to be trained in Classical and Flamenco guitar. In 2020, he completed his M.Ed. in Clinical Mental Health Counseling at Auburn University. Still at Auburn University, he is currently a student in a Ph.D. program in Counselor Education. Matthew is the graduate assistant in the Auburn University College of Sciences and Mathematics Office of Inclusion, Equity, and Diversity, in addition to having interned as a clinical therapist in an inpatient psychiatric setting. His research interests include marginalized populations, group therapy, using music in counseling and Existential factors in counseling.

Eric Hall serves as a Program Coordinator for the Engineering Academic Excellence Program. The program focuses on recruiting, retaining, and advising minoritized students pursuing a STEM degree at Auburn University. His responsibilities include creating professional development opportunities and academic support programs to provide students with a sense of community as they matriculate through college. He has a higher education background in residence life and career services, where he worked on diversity and inclusion initiatives. At Auburn, he serves as an instructor for a STEM first-year seminar course and introductory course within the business school. In teaching for a few years, his teaching philosophy is centered around the transformative learning theory and Kolb's Learning Cycle. He is a doctoral student in Higher Education & Administration at Auburn University. His research interests lie in formal mentorship programs for minoritized students and success strategies for minoritized students pursuing a STEM degree.

Quortne R. Hutchings, Ph.D. (they/them/theirs) is an Assistant Professor in Higher Education and Student Affairs at Northern Illinois University. Their research primarily focuses on Black undergraduate and graduate experiences in higher education, minoritized student affairs professional experiences with a focus on intersectionality and critical queer frameworks. They have over nine years of higher education professional experiences in academic advising, orientation, multicultural affairs, leadership development, and TRiO programmatic interventions. Quortne received their baccalaureate degree from Pennsylvania State University in African and African American Studies, Master of Education in Education, Policy, Organization, and Leadership with a concentration in Higher Education from University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign, and Ph.D. in Higher Education from Loyola University Chicago.

Emily A. Johnson, Ph.D. (they/them) is Assistant Director of Assessment at the University of Houston Downtown. Their education includes a Ph.D. and M.Ed. in Higher Education Leadership from The University of Texas at Austin and a B.M. in Vocal Performance from Southern Methodist University. Dr. Johnson focuses on connecting research, theory, and practice to advance and center equity, particularly in the areas of institutional research, assessment, pedagogy, and student success.

Sara Kitsch, Ph.D. (she/her/hers) is an Assistant Professor of Leadership at Air University at Maxwell Air Force Base. Her research interests are grounded in gender, citizenship, and civic participation and takes seriously the visual and media representations of women as civic actors in U.S. political contexts to explore how women strategize, participate, and create opportunities for women's voices in public life. Air University.

Elizabeth Legerski, Ph.D. (she/her/hers) is an Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of North Dakota. Her research interests include gender, family, social inequality, and health and social policy. Her work explores the way family characteristics, employment opportunities, social policies, and religious values shape the lives of low-income, working-class, and other marginalized families. She is also interested in the scholarship of teaching, including the use of open education resources and technologies to reduce educational inequalities. Her work has been published in journals such as *Social Forces*, *Gender & Society*, *Sex Roles*, *GLBT Family Studies*, *Health Sociology Review*, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, *Sociology Compass*, and *Frontiers in Education*.

Austin McCoy, Ph.D. (he/him/his) is an Assistant Professor of history at Auburn University. His research interests focus on social movements and activism, the carceral state, and hip-hop culture.

Hope McCoy, Ph.D. (she/they/theirs) is a Postdoctoral Research Associate with the Pullias Center for Higher Education at the University of Southern California. Dr. McCoy works with the Promoting At-Promise Student Success (PASS) project, a mixed-method research study, specifically working on developing, assessing, and sustaining professional learning communities. McCoy's research agenda focuses on the intersection between education and diplomacy, with an interest in transnational education and policy. McCoy's dissertation examined Russian Cultural Centers in Africa, identifying the ways that nation states and students use higher education to engage in critical geopolitics. A Fulbright scholar (2015–2016 Russia) with multidisciplinary expertise, McCoy has also worked as a research strategist at Harvard University on projects related to racial justice and equity, and inclusion. Dr. McCoy has a bachelor's degree in Psychology from Northwestern University and a master's degree and Ph.D. from UCLA in Education.

Kimberly X. Mulligan, Ph.D. (she/her/hers) earned her B.S. and M.S. in Chemistry from Florida Agricultural & Mechanical University and Ph.D. in Molecular Physiology and Biophysics from Vanderbilt University. Upon completion of her degree, she worked for the Vanderbilt University Center for Science Outreach where she merged her love of science and desire to enhance STEM education through the creation of elective scientific curriculum and professional development opportunities which fostered interdisciplinary learning in the United States and abroad. In her current role as the Assistant Dean of Inclusion, Equity, and Diversity for the Auburn University College of Sciences and Mathematics, she works to develop and implement initiatives which create an inclusive environment for a diverse student body, faculty, and staff. Dr. Mulligan utilizes her position to explore new avenues to promote inclusion in higher education to help shape a STEM workforce that reflects our diverse population.

Thalia Mulvihill, Ph.D. (Dr.) is Professor of Higher Education and Social Foundations in the Department of Educational Leadership at Ball State University. She teaches several qualitative research methods and academic writing courses for doctoral students and has authored six books as well as 77 refereed publications, co-edits *The Teacher Educator* journal,

and is the recipient of numerous teaching, research, and mentoring awards.

Pat Munday, Ph.D. (he/him/his) is a Professor of Science and Technology Studies with Montana Tech in Butte. He has taught a wide array of web-based courses since 1999, including courses in communication, history, and philosophy. He has long been interested in issues concerning multicultural education in his own teaching of and working with Han and minoritized students in China, Indigenous American students, and international students in the United States. He has also researched multicultural education and has published on the history of American students in Germany, twentieth-century Chinese American students in China, and contemporary Chinese minoritized students in China.

Jonathan J. Okstad, MBA, M.Ed. (he/him/his) is a doctoral candidate in the higher education program at Loyola University Chicago and currently serves as a research and teaching assistant. Before enrolling at Loyola, he served in various higher education roles within academic affairs, advancement, alumni relations, and student activities. Previously, he worked in the non-profit sector in the United States and Central America for an NGO. Jonathan's research interests center around equitable and inclusive learning environments, university finance and governance, and underrepresented populations and communities in higher education. Jonathan received his baccalaureate degree from North Dakota State University in sociology and earned a Master of Education degree in youth development leadership from the University of Minnesota and a Master of Business Administration degree from St. Catherine University.

Julian Oliver (he/him/his) is a two-time graduate of Wright State University where he earned his Bachelors of Science in Athletic Training/Sports Medicine & his Masters of Education in Student Affairs Administration. Although Julian has been with the Auburn Family for a short time, he has intentionally fostered a genuine and meaningful relationship with all the students he serves. Julian firmly believes that no matter what office or department an individual works in, the students will not care how much you know until they know you really care. As the Office of Inclusion, Equity & Diversity Program Coordinator, Julian hopes to continue to build up young adults to become leaders within their future professions and their surrounding communities. If one wants to reach a destination quickly, they go alone; but if one wants to go far,

they unite as one community and go together. And that is exactly the type of culture that Julian hopes to manifest as he continues his career within Higher Education.

C. Casey Ozaki, Ph.D. (she/her/hers) is a Professor in the College of Education and Human Development at the University of North Dakota and the Chair for the Department of Education, Health, and Behavior Studies. During the period discussed in Chapter 9, she served as a Faculty Fellow for Inclusive Excellence, working with faculty and academic units on diversity and inclusion in the classroom.

Laura Parson, Ph.D. (she/her/hers) is Assistant Professor of Educational and Organizational Leadership at North Dakota State University. Her work seeks to understand how policy, procedures, discourses, and institutional environments inform student experiences, and how the institution coordinates those factors through translocal practices.

Bri Rhodes (she/her/hers) is a doctoral student at the University of North Dakota's Education Foundation and Research Department. She also serves as the Director of International Student Advising at Mount Holyoke College. Her research interests include emotional labor and caring work as relates to identity and positionality. Her work focuses on the expectations individuals face to perform emotional labor and caring work, often based on gender or racial identity, created disproportionate burdens and thus forming a barrier not faced by the more privileged. Additional interests are education as a tool of liberation, increasing access to higher education for underrepresented groups, and decolonizing the classroom. Her work has been published in *Frontiers in Education*.

Elizabeth Bond Rogers, Ph.D. (she/her/ hers) has had the opportunity to work in many roles in her career in education including public high school teacher, outdoor educator, adjunct faculty, college administrator, community education organizer, and instructor of faculty development. Liz received her M.Ed. from UC Santa Barbara and her Ph.D. in Educational Leadership & Policy at the University of Utah. Currently Liz serves as the Director of Faculty Development and Transformational Educational Initiatives at Salt Lake Community College. Liz engages in faculty and staff professional development, climate assessments, program development, and curriculum design, and she deeply appreciates collaborating with colleagues in this work. Liz's research and practice are grounded in gender and racial justice, equity-mindedness, and compassion.

Raji Swaminathan, Ph.D. (Dr.) is Professor in the Department of Educational Policy & Community Studies in the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Her research and teaching interests span innovative methods in qualitative research, urban education, and international alternative education. She has authored five books and has been the recipient of several teaching and research awards. She conducts professional development for teachers in alternative schools internationally.

Jessica A. Weise (she/her/they) is a doctoral student in the Administration of Higher Education program at Auburn University working as a graduate research assistant. She has an M.Ed. in Administration of Higher Education and a minor in Sport Management from Auburn University and a B.S. in Sociology from Northern Arizona University. Her research interests focus on student activism and queerly interrogating heteropatriarchal and white supremacist structures affecting campus climate within and beyond higher education.

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Introduction

Laura Parson and C. Casey Ozaki

Education in virtual settings¹ is a reality that was forced on almost all higher education practitioners in March of 2020, yet online education was already a reality for many higher education practitioners prior to COVID-19 and looming on the horizon for many of the rest. COVID-19 accelerated, at a significant financial, emotional, and mental cost, higher education's transition to virtual education. In 2020, the transition of courses and content online occurred almost overnight, which required instructors to transform a face-to-face or hybrid course into an online

¹We use online and virtual interchangeably in this volume to refer to education delivered synchronously and asynchronously via virtual methods including Learning Management Systems (LMS) like Canvas and Blackboard and live videoconferencing programs like Zoom and Microsoft Teams.

L. Parson (✉)

North Dakota State University, Fargo, ND, USA

e-mail: laura.parson@ndsu.edu

C. C. Ozaki

University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, ND, USA

e-mail: carolyn.ozaki@email.und.edu

medium. This transition required instructors to, at a minimum, transition content, transform teaching methods, and learn new technologies. They did this all while dealing with the impact of a pandemic on their lives and the lives of their students. Even without the added pressure of a global pandemic, creating or revising an online course requires a great deal of (often unpaid and/or unrecognized) work, and so this quick transition was often rocky and fraught. The “education of the future” was accelerated to the present, and this revealed the need for more knowledge, training, and innovation in virtual education. Furthermore, and critically, the transition to virtual education also illuminated stark disparities between students’ access to higher education content when delivered virtually, which further exacerbated existing disparities.

Indeed, COVID-19 and the resultant transition to virtual education highlighted what critics of online education had been saying for years: online education is not the panacea for all of higher education’s woes. Without careful and thoughtful attention, online education can exacerbate problems of access, equitable inclusion, and content knowledge construction. Yet, online higher education can also present an opportunity for expanded access to higher education, diminished student costs, and increased profit. There is potential (perhaps great potential) for virtual education to promote social justice in ways that traditional higher education cannot. But the costs of online higher education are real, too, and we will illustrate some of those costs through an exploration of the history of online education and a problematizing of the tenets on which many pro-online education arguments are based. We begin this introduction to the volume with a brief and targeted overview of the history of online education, followed by a discussion of its limitations and potential for great harm. Then, we discuss the opportunities presented by online education, the opportunities on which this volume is premised. Finally, we conclude with an overview of the chapters included in this volume and, we hope, cautionary optimism that, with careful attention and intention, social justice can still be promoted in online and virtual education settings.

OVERVIEW OF ONLINE EDUCATION

Feenberg (2017) described the emergence of online education as a supplement to distance education—educational content was sent via mail to students—where students would “discuss” the content received with

fellow students on a web forum tool. The first course delivered that way was through Western Behavioral Sciences Institute in 1982 (Feenberg, 2017). While this use of an online tool was to supplement student learning, there had been attempts to replace instructors with technology as early as the 1950s with Computer Aided Instruction (CAI), although those attempts were not successful; computers cannot replace human interaction (Feenberg, 2017). Yet, as budget cuts in higher education became a perennial challenge, institutions viewed online education as an economic alternative to live, human interaction (Feenberg, 2017). These pushes for online education sought to remove the need for human interaction despite technological advances that were allowing virtual interactions to happen more easily and synchronously (Feenberg, 2017).

As virtual tools continued to evolve and facilitate synchronous human interaction more easily, the next major innovation in online education came with Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs), which brought courses to thousands of students through direct instruction mediums, like videos and readings, with evaluations and discussions, facilitated by peers instead of instructors (Feenberg, 2017). MOOCs were also viewed with excitement in higher education as a cost-saving course delivery model (Turner & Gassaway, 2019), yet they had a 90% dropout rate (Feenberg, 2017) and raised concerns about the ease in which western knowledges are exported to non-Western locations, further colonizing global higher education (Adam, 2019; Reyes & Segal, 2019). However, those criticisms did not temper hopes that MOOCs could help to bring education one step closer to automation and, therefore, reduce faculty salary costs: “The promise of technology is the transformation of education into a decreasing cost item, like CDs or pencils. Initial investment in courses may be high, but the *n*th copy will be nearly free. Economies of scale will save mass education from bankruptcy” (Feenberg, 2017, p. 365). Indeed, online education outside of the MOOC model, which had largely fallen out of fashion prior to COVID-19 global quarantines, raised hopes that higher education could be exported nationally and globally and simultaneously reduce costs (Smith et al., 2018).

Pre-COVID, more common than fully online courses, synchronous or asynchronous, were blended courses, where different types and amounts of online resources were incorporated into face-to-face classes. This was often seen through the use of Learning Management System (LMS) such as Canvas, Blackboard, or Google Classroom where portions of the content were delivered online. One example of a blended classroom

model was the “flipped classroom,” where direct instruction was delivered asynchronously for review prior to a synchronous course meeting that often met face-to-face. Class time in the “flipped classroom” was dedicated to projects, collaborative learning, and answering questions, which represented a “customization” of education typical of blended education (Grimaldi & Ball, 2021). Blended education became, at least in some ways, a foundational part of the “hybrid” model that was touted by higher education institutions as the course delivery model during the 2020–2021 academic year. Hybrid courses during COVID-19 were explained at my (Laura’s) institution as a model that allowed for students to attend in-person, virtual-synchronously, virtual-asynchronously, or a combination of the three and still receive a similar educational experience. The description of “hyflex” or hybrid/online education as creating equal access to course content is evidence of the extreme ways online educational tools were marketed as creating equitable access but, in practice, required exceptional levels of work from faculty and still could not feasibly offer the same educational experiences across virtual and in-person settings. The need to promote a seamless experience for students who had various expectations for a pandemic college experience illustrates how the student, conceptualized as a consumer, impacted education delivery through the pandemic. Altogether, understanding neoliberalism provides additional insight into the ways that virtual education is marketed and discussed by higher education leaders.

ONLINE EDUCATION AND NEOLIBERALISM

Although a deep exploration of neoliberalism is outside the scope of this chapter, understanding how a neoliberal view of higher education impacts the management and organization of higher education is key to understanding the ways that institutions talk about online education and online learners. According to Maiese (2021), neoliberalism is “an ensemble of ideological forces and norms whose primary aim is to construct a specific kind of social reality, one in which every aspect of human life is managed and evaluated in relation to market demands” (p. 285). In a neoliberal environment, higher education is viewed a commodity instead of a public good (Mayo, 2017), and students are the consumers; through a neoliberal lens, the individual student is responsible for learning the content as long as the institution has provided the educational product (Grimaldi &

Ball, 2021). In this view of students, students are expected to be self-directed, motivated, and seek out any needed help and support (Winslow, 2017); as consumers who are responsible for their own development, they are also expected to continue learning across their lifetime to increase or maintain their role as a valuable participant in the economy (e.g., life-long learning. Through a neoliberal lens, an institution must supply the educational product that helps students to meet an economic goal (i.e., employment; Maiese, 2021). Once an institution provides an adequate educational experience to students, students are responsible for being successful: “blame is placed on individuals, not the structure, institution, or external circumstances that put them in a position to fail in the first place” (Winslow, 2017, p. 587). This allows institutions to place the blame on students who do not succeed as lacking motivation, skills, or foundational knowledge instead of being held accountable for lacking content, delivery, and/or student support. Further, by marketing online education as a method for increasing access to content using examples of marginalized learners who were successful online, institutions tout online education as a social justice initiative that will emancipate disadvantaged learners without the infrastructure, content, and practices needed to create a truly inclusive and emancipatory online learning experience (Winslow, 2017).

Neoliberal market changes, such as the privatization of public services or the rapid shift to online learning tools during the COVID-19 pandemic, often occur during crises:

in the wake of geopolitical unrest, economic turmoil, and natural disasters ... neoliberalism can then absorb the most painful effects of these manufactured crises by shifting chaos and upheaval onto easily disposed of populations: the poor, the sick, the immigrant, and the elderly. In contrast, it is the powerful and aligned that can take full advantage of neoliberal disasters. For them, neoliberalism represents a platform where free individuals can then compete fairly, unencumbered by bureaucratic interference from the state. (Winslow, 2017, p. 587)

In these “raids on the public sphere” (Winslow, 2017, p. 587), neoliberalism thrives on crisis, “because it is only in vulnerable moments—when citizens are psychologically unmoored, economically fragile, or physically uprooted—that old habits could be remade in accordance with the purity and perfection [*sic*] envisioned” (Winslow, 2017, p. 586). Prior

to the pandemic, online education had most firmly taken root in the for-profit education sector: “it is a natural occurrence whenever technological evolutions disrupt the status quo that they initially take root at the bottom of the market—in this case in online education’s adoption in for-profit schools, community colleges, and nonselective public schools—before moving up and displacing more established institutions” (Winslow, 2017, p. 583). For institutions, online education can be an opportunity to increase profits: “By appealing to efficiency, cost-effectiveness, and disruptive technological innovations, online education facilitates the commodification of higher education in ways that reflect the core principles of market logics. For example, online education discourses can scale up from hundreds of students to thousands and millions at minimal cost” (Winslow, 2017, p. 591). As the pandemic forced a shift to online education, institutions might now try to capitalize and keep or expand online delivery of courses where it proves viable (and, perhaps, even where it did/does not lead to equitable learning outcomes).

PROBLEMATIZING ONLINE EDUCATION

Early on, online courses were often delivered by private and/or for-profit institutions, such as the University of Phoenix in the United States, where education relied on discussions facilitated by tutors and delivered pre-recorded content created by professors in a way that combined “deprofessionalization and automation” (Feenberg, 2017, p. 369). Across the industry, online courses had high attrition rates (Feenberg, 2017), students had reduced access to on-campus resources (Smith et al., 2018), and, reportedly, students felt like they were paying the same price as on-campus students for a lesser education (Smith et al., 2018). Faculty reinforced reports of diminished educational environment online, reporting that they struggled to create and implement critical pedagogy and provide important emotional support online (Smith et al., 2018). Research supports the assertion that an online education is “less than:” “When the face-to-face educational relationship is substituted for a screen, interaction becomes strained, less enjoyable, and less rewarding” (Winslow, 2017, p. 585). As a consequence, online education often limits social interaction between students (Winslow, 2017, p. 585): “the online learning environment affords and solicits a more distant, less fully embodied mode of communication and interpersonal engagement. There are few opportunities to develop the sorts of communicative skills

needed to navigate disagreement or partake in ‘difficult conversations’ about controversial issues” (Maiese, 2021, p. 294). The challenges of online education are not mitigated by synchronous courses: Although synchronous online classes may increase opportunities for interaction and collaboration, they cannot not adapt to the reality of student lives (especially relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic, when family schedules drastically changed; Schwartzman, 2020).

The online student often targeted by online education is classified as underserved (Feenberg, 2017), and many students may need access to technological tools that are not evenly available across the “digital divide,” such as appropriate bandwidth, software, computers/tablets, consistent access (Schwartzman, 2020; Smith et al., 2018). A student’s frustration with trying to access the content because of technology limitations can become a barrier to learning that occurs before instruction begins. According to Winslow (2017), prior to COVID-19, online learners were “more vulnerable to unforeseen events, are less technically skilled, less confident in their technical abilities, less likely to have Internet access and access to computers, have less prior computer training, less educational experience, lower class ranks and incoming GPAs, less learner readiness, less awareness of their own learning style, and are more likely to work outside of school” (pp. 585–586). Further, even though online courses are often marketed as more accessible, learning materials may not be always truly accessible (e.g., lacking alternate text for images) (Schwartzman, 2020).

The promise of online higher education was to increase access to people who would have been traditionally excluded, either through test scores, location, or money (Winslow, 2017). Yet, when access is limited by technology, materials are inaccessible, student interaction is limited, and/or content is delivered without regard to context, that promise fails, and the failures of higher education are replicated online. Within a neoliberal environment, where the onus is on the student to perform, failure is seen as the student’s fault even when infrastructure has not been put into place to support student learning. Crisis only serves to reinforce an emphasis on individual responsibility, valorizing students who are able to succeed despite increased challenges, “reinforcing the meritocracy that accompanies privilege” (Schwartzman, 2020, p. 510).

Online education also puts additional labor on faculty and instructors. Pushes for more online education often come in times of increased retrenchment measures (e.g., budget cuts, reduced hours, program cuts),

where an increased teaching load may come with the additional burden of increased online education requirements (Smith et al., 2018). Smith and colleagues (2018) found that online education created challenges for instructors as it related to their available time, as faculty had to spend time converting face-to-face courses to online formats, reviewing increasing numbers of student discussion posts, all while they faced pressure to be available to students all of the time. This resulted in less time for research and other scholarly activities and less time for individual attention for students. While online education may have been promoted as an opportunity for professors to make their content available nationally or globally, the pressure put on faculty to create online content, record high-quality videos, and facilitate online environments—skills that most faculty are not trained in—resulted in an increased workload and increased pressures to perform to meet market demand (Winslow, 2017).

OPPORTUNITIES FOR ONLINE EDUCATION

Despite numerous concerns about online education, it is still considered by many to be one future of higher education that increases access to previously unavailable content and credentialing. We suggest that many of the promises of online education are still possible, although that possibility relies on appropriate instructional methods, thoughtful use of technology, and attention to equitable student access, which we define as access not limited by technology or dis/ability. Yet, even equitable access must be carefully considered, especially as access to Western beliefs, methods, and systems of thinking risks further colonization through delivery methods, teaching methods, and colonizing content:

At risk are diverse approaches to learning, indigenous ways of teaching, and unique perspectives on how knowledge is transmitted and received within different cultures. Because technology design and development accelerate exponentially, countries which have fewer resources, infrastructure, and knowledge base become set in the role of education consumers, and those countries which have greater technology resources continue to benefit as the producers and deliverers of higher education on a global level. This producer–consumer relationship increases dependency upon Western approaches to higher education and further promotes a growing power differential among nations and cultures. (Reyes & Segal, 2019, p. 382)

Although globalization is often touted as an unmitigated good, whether or not content should be globalized through online learning needs to consider the audience and if and how the educational processes, including the content, perpetuates colonization (Reyes & Segal, 2019).

Altogether, online education has the potential to vastly expand access: “distance formats of course delivery are valued for their capacity to expand access for students who are socially disadvantaged or geographically isolated. It is believed that students from remote communities, Indigenous students, students with varying (dis)abilities, and others who face structural barriers to accessing post-secondary education can achieve a degree without leaving their home communities” (Smith et al., 2018, p. 699). Online education, especially as it reaches a wide audience and connects individuals that may not have otherwise been connected, provides an opportunity for consciousness raising, or an, “opportunity for disadvantaged populations to build community responsibility and engagement” (Reyes & Segal, 2019, p. 380). Online education,

creates opportunities for those who would not otherwise have the chance to pursue higher education to expand their understanding of social conditions and thereby raise their levels of awareness. Such consciousness is an essential means of acquiring the tools to succeed in local and global economies and social structures. In this educational environment, technology may be harnessed to incubate ideas to alleviate poverty, separation, and oppression. (Reyes & Segal, 2019, p. 380)

The achievement of these goals, however lofty, requires careful attention to content, access, teaching methods, and use of technology. We discuss each component of virtual education in this volume.

OUTLINE OF THE VOLUME

In this volume, we discuss ways to mitigate the potential harms of online education as well as opportunities to expand access to content, promote social justice, and consider equity and inclusion in course design and delivery. The COVID-19 pandemic led higher education courses as well as student affairs and faculty development programming to move to virtual and online settings. This revealed a clear gap in the skill set for higher education professionals across the board—most were not trained as instructors and almost none had received formal training in synchronous

and asynchronous online. While virtual classroom settings can provide new ways of access to higher education, if those virtual settings do not consider privilege, access, and equity, those settings will just serve to reinforce and replicate existing marginalization and disempowerment.

In this book, the fourth volume of the series, we focus on how to promote social justice in higher education in virtual and remote classroom settings. Chapters focus on updating the scholarship of teaching and learning in the context of the online classroom, providing updates to the application of traditional learning theories in virtual and remote settings, and specific applications of SoTL to improve teaching and learning to promote equity in the classroom through specific content areas such as STEM.

Chapter 2, *Designing and Using Online Discussions to Promote Social Justice and Equity*, provides an overview of the research on the experiences of underrepresented students in online courses and share resources to build on student strengths to create welcoming classrooms. Using culturally responsive pedagogy, universal design for learning, and transformative learning, the authors demonstrate how to create equitable small group online discussions using multi-modal asynchronous and synchronous technologies.

Chapter 3, *Designing the Syllabus for an Online Course: Focus on Learners and Equity Online*, describes how syllabus design can create challenges for learners and provides actionable steps and examples for how instructors can leverage technology to create syllabi that meet the needs of diverse learners. The author's focus is on how to create a learner-centered syllabus that both centers learning and equity, including ways to consider accessibility and context.

Chapter 4, *Synergistic Pedagogies in Virtual Spaces: Preparing Social Justice Educational Researchers Through SoTL*, discusses approaches to teaching qualitative research methods courses online with a focus on how empathy, critical questioning, and ambiguity inform the exploration of power structures as a part of research design and analysis. The authors also discuss how to teaching these courses online to promote reflection, critical questioning, and empathy.

Chapter 5, *Remoting into STEM Summer Bridge Programs*, describes how to adapt a STEM summer bridge program, a program that has been identified as important in recruiting and retaining students traditionally underrepresented in STEM programs, in virtual environments. After discussing the components of successful bridge programs, the chapter

describes methods for adapting a program to a virtual environment through the lens of creating Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE: Museus, 2014).

Chapter 6, *Transitions, engagements, and environments: Supporting underrepresented students through e-learning*, presents curriculum and pedagogical strategies for faculty to incorporate through the lens of the Equity-Minded Framework and Technology Acceptance Model. These frameworks are used as ways to help ensure that underrepresented students are engaged and supported to flourish in an e-learning format. The authors provide tools and resources to support learners from diverse backgrounds in multiple education settings and levels.

Chapter 7, *Brave New World: Transformational Teaching for a Web-based Multicultural Education Course in the Age of COVID-19*, explores the difference between a “safe” space and a “brave” space, exploring why creating a brave space is needed to promote more equitable learning spaces that promote social justice. Through the lens of transformative teaching, this chapter provides actionable recommendations to create a virtual classroom environment that balances challenge and support and encourages critical reflection.

Chapter 8, *Building Virtual Communities of Practice for Equity in Education*, discusses how to help practitioners implement equity changes in their schools. The authors discuss how to create virtual communities of practice and examines the experiences of participants in the RIDES Institute through the lens of Ubuntu. Through the framework of Ubuntu, the chapter explores how creating communities of practices that includes teachers and school leaders can create a sense of belonging through a shared mission.

Chapter 9, *Resisting State Violence: Teaching Social Justice Virtually in an Era of Black Lives Matter and the Coronavirus*, discusses how COVID-19 and 2020’s uprisings against structural racism led to a reconceptualization of how to build community, teach histories of anti-racist movements, and to prepare students to engage politics virtually. The author describes how he reimaged teaching history and organizing in a virtual setting in a way that helped students to develop the organizing tools they needed to mobilize people for protest, create political education projects, and to form their own organizations.

Chapter 10, *Four Keys to Unlocking Equitable Learning: Retrieval, Spacing, Interleaving, and Elaborative Encoding*, reviews four of the most heavily researched and empirically supported cognitive learning principles: