The Digitalisation of Pedagogy: A focus on digital poverty at The University of Manchester

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INTRODUCTION & CONTEXT

As millenials and Gen Z-ers, we grew up with relatively democratised access to the digital and technologies; what was once broadly considered as a privilege, became a norm in our daily life in the 21st Century. In this study, Higher Education particularly triggers our interest as the omnipresence of digitalisation is even more striking, where "digital teaching and learning is increasingly embedded" (Anna Mckie, 2020). Thus, students are expected to master the digital and technologies in symbiosis. However, in the wake of COVID-19, what we once assumed as small issues, resurged with greater impact. Indeed, rather than bringing up new digital issues , this pandemic inherently shone light on digital divide, a digital exclusion that was a problem before coronavirus, but [it is] compounding it." (CCHPR, 2020). In the pursuit of online innovation, individuals are at stake yet, this rush seems to go on at their expenses. Through this crisis, the education system is facing an uncertain future that calls into question the future of humanity altogether." (Howlett, 2018). In order to assess digital discrepancies, we believe it is important to redefine what digital poverty is - too often wrongly assumed as sole hardware issues. Therefore, this leads us to question the pace of change and its impact on the adaptation of the individuals behind. Moreover, we aim to raise awareness on the initiatives that were taken by The University of Manchester, in order to tackle this underlying issue. So, how is the digital not a completely independent body from human beings?

RESEARCH QUESTION(S)

1. What are the main advantages & disadvantages that the digitisation of pedagogy has on students in digital poverty?
2. Does online pedagogy democratises learning or does it participate in a wider learning inequality?

RESEARCH SITE AND PARTICIPANTS

Semi- structured Interviews with sets of questions:
- Danielle George (Associate VP Blended & Flexible Learning)
- Anna Verges Bausili (Elearning Manager)

Online research:
- Google Scholar, Gov.uk, Scholarly articles.

FINDINGS

Definition of digital poverty according to The Office of Communications: "non-access to one of the core items of digital infrastructure, which are: appropriate hardware, appropriate software, reliable access to the internet, technical support and repair when required , a trained teacher or instructor, an appropriate study space."

Assessment of a fully online learning experience over the past academic year 20/21 at The University of Manchester:
- Advantages:
  - **Financially**: digital learning can been seen as financially advantageous for students in digital poverty due to cost savings. Since rather than having to live on campus they can save money paying local rent or commuting. The saved money can go towards reducing their digital poverty (e.g. buying new hardware/software) - if this is not already covered by the university.
  - **Academically**: Flexibility in time and pace of learning thanks so asynchronous teaching. Digital learning has been found to offer a plethora of academic advantages for students in digital poverty due to increased learning capabilities offered by tech. For instance, such students can benefit from platforms such as Zoom, Google docs and Breakout rooms, at the touch of a button, thus increasing their learning capabilities that were not available beforehand. Note: this is only applicable if students have sufficient digital support, such as computers, wifi etc, all the requests of which have been met by UOM.

- Disadvantages:
  - **Academically**: Students in digital poverty can be seen as largely disadvantaged by online learning due to reduced learning capabilities and/or increased learning challenges. For instance, students may struggle to find a quiet place to work, have poor internet connection, poor access to hardware, and according to a pulse survey by the Faculty Humanities, UG studnets express a Work Overload. Such challenges are often resolved on campus, where students are offered quiet places to work, desktops and secured connectivity. Hence the disadvantage the shift to digital has on this demographic who can not benefit from its potential. Each Faculty has its own budget : so different software and platform. Ideally would be best to have the same platform but size problem. At faculty problem.
  - **Socially:** Isolation, no government support atlthough UoM is a public institution.

- Support from UOM to reducthe e the digital poverty gap of its students:
1. **The Hardship fund** (The Living Cost Support Fund): £1.6m from alumni/teachers etc, to help students in financial struggle
2. **Help Me Get Online:** meet demands such as computers, headphones etc for students who lack them: 150 requests for laptops university-wide
3. **Change in assessment:** more support and flexibility taking digital possible issues into account: submission window 10m grace period, assessment pledge - 2x 1w extension, no detriment/no disadvantage policy pledge (2020), live chat during exam season.

In addition to offering increased support, the shift to online has brought to light the importance of digital skills for the potential of both online learning and teaching to be reached.
- **For Professors:** need to be at ease with the tech used in lectures, seminars, marking, communication etc. In order to ensure that teaching is seamlessly and effective: Digital skills workshops and Online and Blended Workshops.
- **For students:** In order to ensure that learning and working effective, from September all students will have access to a digital literacy program with access to thousands of digital skills, with digital passports reducing digital poverty, and increasing the capability students have to maximise their potential from the shift to online teaching.

DISCUSSION

We found that correspondence courses do work and seem to be efficient as they gather the crucial principles of learning: teacher presence, active learning, community and feedback, which can all be done online. Thus, in person teaching could be theoretically considered as non essential. However, face to face offers certain *irreplaceable* benefits. It allows and stimulates engagement, trust, friendship, social settings. Therefore, the best option would be blended learning as it provides a comparatively ideal environment: flexibility on learning pace and time, while allowing for social settings and real interaction that shape our beings as individuals.It is also important to increase digital literacy, namely human and non-human actors that act upon each other throughout the practices of knowledge production (Gourlay, L., & Oliver, M. (2018), in which the role of Higher Education Institutions can be crucial.

REFERENCES

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