Intersectional Analysis of Online and Hybrid Schools

Anne E. Jonas
School of Information
UC Berkeley
Berkeley, CA 94022, USA
ajonas@ischool.berkeley.edu

Abstract

As online and hybrid secondary schools gain in popularity, refusal to engage with longstanding issues of stratification, violence, and discrimination within educational institutions threaten to exacerbate social inequality along gendered, racial, geographic, and socioeconomic lines. By attending to the experiences of students who are frequently marginalized within traditional education systems in online and hybrid schools, scholars and designers can better assist in interrupting patterns of educational injustice in emerging platforms.

Author Keywords

Education; online schools; inequality; intersectional feminism.

ACM Classification Keywords

K.3.1 [Computer Uses in Education]: Distance learning

Introduction

In her 2016 essay in *Digital Sociologies*, Tressie McMillan Cottom has demonstrated how an intersectional black feminist approach to algorithmic stratification can reveal diverse practices in relation to privacy and visibility that constructively expand debates around privacy [9]. She argues, "Intersectionality theories or methods have not yet been fully realized in the study of digitality and education, a critical

institutional axis of social stratification." While there is enthusiasm about the potential to engender online learning that is "socially embedded, interest-driven, and oriented toward educational, economic, or political opportunity," [6] it is unclear whether online schools support these possibilities evenly for all students. There is copious evidence that the trends analyzed by McMillan Cottom are also influencing the development of online and hybrid forms of secondary education, with a range of privatized entanglements from the purchase of curricular materials or devices to online schools fully developed and managed by private entities [1]. In addition, the forces that "target shared vulnerabilities" of black, poor, and female students, such as limited spare time [9] in recruiting to for-profit institutions combine in secondary schools with school reform movements where charter schools have traditionally targeted students of color [5, 10].

This combination of factors suggests that centering the experiences of students who experience structural discrimination on the basis of gender identity, race, sexuality, class, disability, and parenthood status in the study of online and hybrid schools through an intersectional feminist approach would productively expand understandings of the mechanisms of inequality in such environments. Such findings could in turn contribute to designing platforms and policies that better support students who currently face diminished life chances due to unequally distributed problems in schools such as criminalization, segregation, and limited quality instruction. My proposed research seeks to explore the experiences of diverse students in online and hybrid schools in order to understand what an intersectional feminist approach to online and hybrid schools might look like — what formations might combat structural legacies of oppression and support collective liberation?

Potential Areas of Concern

Prior research suggests particular areas of concern for students who have experienced marginalization in an educational context. However, empirical inquiry with an intersectional feminist lens is necessary in order to determine how digitization will affect these students, since the particular formations cannot be predicted in advance, particularly, as McMillan Cottom suggests, given the overwhelming focus in much online education research and design on white male learners as the presumed norm [9].

Personalized Learning & Segregation
Several high-profile philanthropic efforts have recently focused on "personalized learning" initiatives that seek to improve student learning outcomes by targeting instruction and curriculum to individual student characteristics. However, traditionally classroom "tracking" has disadvantaged Black and Latinx students, disproportionately placing them in lower-tracked classrooms with sub-par instruction and curricular options [3]. There is no evidence that personalized learning would not perpetuate the same sort of segregated opportunities. In fact, this kind of "algorithmic stratification" [9] may be worsened by being less visible to those who are sorted into differentiated learning paths, particularly for those students in online schools who have minimal interaction with their peers. However, personalized learning could instead be used to strike a balance between connecting students with broader networks and unsettling their expectations, in line with traditions of feminist pedagogy [7].

Surveillance & Violence
Students of color are often subject to disproportionate and harsh disciplinary regimes in U.S. schools [4, 2]. While online and hybrid schools could provide greater safety and autonomy for students who face violent school environments,

whether from teachers, police, or peers, there is also the potential that digital platforms could lead to greater student surveillance - by administrators or corporations - and limit exposure to social workers or health care professionals, who are sometimes able to make contact with vulnerable students through their traditional school attendance.

Pedagogy & Instruction
In 2012, feminist media scholars Alexandra Juhasz and Anne Balsamo proposed an alternative to the fast-growing "Massive Open Online Course" - the DOCC, or "Distributed Open Collaborative Course" that would operate "according to feminist principles" [8]. Contrary to MOOCs, the DOCC model focuses on conversation and difference, with local nodes drawing on some shared content and facilitated engagement but without one overarching pre-determined curriculum. The DOCC effort highlights opportunities for feminist intervention in online and hybrid school development, yet too many online and hybrid programs seem to move away from more creative and diverse pedagogical efforts, instead promoting centralized forms of knowledge production - and profit [1].

Proposed Research
The proposed study would offer an initial exploration into these areas of potential concern and offer a clearer picture of how online and hybrid schools can be understood through an intersectional feminist approach. Grounded in ethnographic methods, this research seeks to employ participatory methodologies, working with students, teachers, families, and community institutions, as well as platform designers and relevant policy makers, in understanding and responding to the emergence of online and hybrid schools in support of educational justice.

Author Biography
Anne Jonas is a PhD student at the UC Berkeley School of Information. Her research focuses on how people use, create, and understand digital platforms in the context of social inequality. In particular, she studies student experiences with online and hybrid schools in the context of ongoing school reform and privatization policies. She previously worked as a Program Manager at the Barnard Center for Research on Women.

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