

# Designing for Every Student: Practical Advice for Instructional Designers on Applying Social Justice in Learning Design

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Social Justice

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*The authors propose a social justice lens to be adopted by instructional designers in designing curricula that serves the needs of all students while working towards creating an inclusive learning environment. They provide practical recommendations for practitioners in face-to-face, blended, or online settings focusing on five key areas: inclusivity, communication, content, flexibility, and feedback-seeking. Along with theoretical underpinnings, the authors define each of the areas and provide considerations and recommendations for practice that would be applicable in higher education settings.*

## Introduction

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the world has witnessed an immense shift to online education, and the uncertainty of the future modality of education has shed light on the important role that instructional designers play. At the same time, we as educators are becoming more aware of the diverse student demographics in our classrooms in terms of race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and learning abilities, among other factors. As more institutions and instructors reach out to instructional designers for support, the role that these designers play in upholding social justice becomes central. Through their consultations and support, instructional designers have the opportunity to serve as ambassadors for more equitable, inclusive, and diverse education.

The goal of this paper is to explain the importance of using a social justice lens and considering how it can be put into practice in the classroom when designing curricula. We aim to provide practical advice to instructional designers on how to infuse social justice into their designs. This paper is significant to instructional designers in higher education, and industry who are interested in learning more about how they can include aspects of social justice within their educational setting.

We, the authors, have occupied multiple roles in higher education. Being visible minorities, we started as international students. Our experience was enriched by our diverse socio-cultural and pedagogical heritage, coupled with our Canadian experience. At the moment of this paper, our advice is based two-fold. First, on our work as educational developers focusing on equity, diversity, and inclusion, including alternative assessments, and second on our experience teaching in higher education. The recommendations included in this paper have been implemented by at least one of the authors.

## **What Is Social Justice and Why Does it Belong in Classrooms?**

We start with the premise that critical theory gives rise to social justice. Critical theory is a theoretical framework that examines how power is created and maintained in society while taking historical, cultural, and ideological contexts into account (Moisio, 2013). Knowledge is socially constructed in that it is contextualized and reflective of the values and interests of those who produce it (Freire, 1996). In his 1937 essay “Traditional and Critical Theory”, Max Horkheimer (2002) stressed that the main aim of critical theory is to promote a democratic society, emancipate the oppressed, and empower suppressed groups to achieve equality. All people belong to social groups through which they adopt identities based on characteristics including race, gender, class, and religion. Inequality occurs when some social groups are valued more than others, thus giving their members more access to available resources (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). By resources, we refer to the basic human rights people need to survive and thrive, such as adequate healthcare, education, food security, housing, and financial security. From this perspective, society is stratified, divided, and unequal. Social justice seeks to recognize and change these deeply rooted inequalities. Limited access for certain social groups stems from the oppressive systems in place that pose as barriers for some people. These barriers operate at the macro level and are embedded within social systems. They are enforced through laws, legislation, and policies that function to serve one social group over another, hence perpetuating inequality. Such disparities have led to inequalities and injustices such as racism, sexism, genderism, classism, ageism, ableism, and many other “isms” that represent oppressive systems within our society.

In response, social justice calls for seeking equity, equality, and fairness amongst all people, regardless of the social groups to which they subscribe. Teaching is not a neutral act: As educators, we hold a position of power—to influence and make positive social change. Inequalities within society infiltrate our classrooms and our teaching practices through socialization, directly impacting students’ learning experiences. The need to engage in social justice education is imperative during this time of changing student demographics. The student population is becoming much more diverse (Dedman, 2019), requiring that educators cater to varying learning needs. The diversification of the student body includes populations from racialized minority groups, LGBTQ2+, people with disabilities, and individuals from differing socioeconomic backgrounds, including low-income households. Within the realm of higher education, more non-traditional students are attending colleges and universities, including senior citizens.

In this article, we examine various ways by which educators can recognize oppression occurring within the classroom and mitigate it through learning design. We provide considerations for instructional designers on designing curricula through a social justice lens. We adopt Freire’s (1996) focus on critical pedagogies and move away from traditional learning practices such as the ‘banking model’, a metaphor that was developed by Freire, depicting students as empty vessels that are to be filled with knowledge by the teacher (Freire, 1996). A key social justice pitfall of the banking model is that the power is retained with the teacher and the student’s role is seen as that of a passive observer (Jackson, 2016). In contrast, we encourage instructional designers to use communicative dialogue as a catalyst to foster a more egalitarian learning space—a two-way process to enhance learning between the educator and the learner. We believe that communicative dialogue empowers students to take ownership of their own learning process.

More recently, there has been a tremendous focus on embracing equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) approaches in various fields, including education. As Freire (1996) noted, EDI amplifies anti-oppression and social justice into practice through critical pedagogies. Within a classroom, equity is ensuring that all students have access to resources that would enhance their learning while creating the least restrictive learning environment. Diversity is the appreciation of

the various perspectives in the learning process, and inclusion pertains to all students being treated as equals and being included in the learning process.

The instructional designer achieves EDI through knowledge and use of best practices and tools to design lessons and curricula. However, before incorporating EDI work into practice, the instructional designer must understand how oppression operates within society and leads to impacts on students and their learning. Educators must also have a strong foundational understanding of how inequalities can surface within a classroom (e.g., students representing various social groups, being in a society that values one group over another).

For that purpose, instructional designers and educators must both engage in critical self-reflection, not only to check in with their own pedagogical practices and philosophy but also to clarify how they socially identify and position themselves within society. Their work requires constantly engaging in self-reflection to enhance students' experiences.

## **Positionality and Critical Self-Reflection**

Self-knowledge is a key component of building one's identity as an educator. Critical scholars have argued that because educators hold a position of power, there is a tendency for that positioning to lead to some voices being silenced and others favoured within the classroom. Instructional designers occupy the same role as educators when designing a classroom. Therefore, we believe that they also hold a position of power when it comes to empowering students. As unconsciously as this positionality may occur, critical self-reflection is important to understand one's own biases and their impact on one's pedagogical practice.

When engaging in social justice practice, it is important that instructional designers examine their own identity and how they position themselves within society. For example, a person identifying as a Muslim, middle-class woman of colour would hold a worldview that is different from that of a Christian, upper-class White man. These views acquired through individual lenses also impact how individuals decipher and disseminate knowledge, hence impacting the learners' experience.

In this exercise of self-knowledge, turning inward requires instructional designers to reflect on their values and belief system, critically reflecting on their role within social hierarchies. Raising their level of critical consciousness allows them to examine how, as instructional designers, they maintain social hierarchies within classrooms through their practices. As they reflect, they must ask themselves: Whose voices do we amplify? Who is mainly represented in our texts and through the curriculum? Whose voices are silenced? Whose are underrepresented? Reflecting on these questions can help to unpack biases that are normally in place due to a privileged position, in the classroom and society at large.

Designing with social justice in mind begins with self-reflection before any work has begun. An ongoing commitment of this sort requires individuals to check in with themselves from time to time, reflecting on their praxis and its impact. As they position themselves, their understanding translates into their design and how they disseminate knowledge.

As we proceed into this article, we invite you, the reader, to position yourself as both an individual and as an instructional designer as you examine the considerations and recommendations we have listed. Begin by asking yourself three probing questions:

1. What social group(s) do you belong to?
2. Which of your social identities are easiest to identify?
3. Which of your social identities are most difficult to identify?

Asking yourself these probing questions allows you to think about yourself in new ways. In doing so, you may identify as being part of a group that is advantaged (privileged, dominant), or targeted (minoritized, oppressed) within society. Your relation to a group further influences norms, values, and beliefs, which eventually flow into your practice.

# Recommendations for Practice

After completing the positioning exercise, we invite readers to examine the following recommendations, which we have grouped into five areas: inclusivity, communication, content, flexibility, and feedback-seeking. We define each of the areas and provide considerations and recommendations for practice.

## Inclusivity

Perhaps the most encompassing definition of inclusivity can be found in Foreman's (2008) book, *Inclusion in Action*. He defined inclusivity as the following:

*A concept that extends well beyond students with a disability and encompasses the idea that all schools should strive to provide optimal learning environments for all their students, regardless of their social, cultural or ethnic background, or their ability or disability (Foreman, 2008, p. 31).*

A large body of work is concentrated on accessibility in learning design. The COVID-19 pandemic brought to the forefront issues of digital accessibility, which prompted recommendations for low bandwidth design and asynchronous design. We agree on the importance of those two recommendations and extend them to include the three stages of the digital divide: access, use, and empowerment (Hohlfeld et al., 2008). We also base our work on the premise that the digital divide extends social inequalities.

For the first stage of the digital divide, access (Hohlfeld et al., 2008), we recommend thinking about the diversity of students who will be taking the course. You are designing for learners who have full or limited access to technology (laptop, mobile, internet), learners who are taking the course in their first or second language, and learners who have no accommodation requirements or need visual or auditory requirements. For this level of accessibility, our recommendations could be summarized by following the universal design for learning by providing multiple opportunities for engagement, representation, action, and expression. In addition, plan for low bandwidth by providing asynchronous sessions and optimizing the documents used, such as PDFs, video files, images, and documents.

In addition to the accessibility needs of your students, it is important to consider how busy students could be. They might be trying to balance coursework with family duties, work responsibilities, caring for dependents, or simply caring for themselves. The COVID-19 situation is a great example of how learners can be pulled in multiple directions. Our recommendation is to plan for structure, consistency, and predictability in your design. Examples include having a similar module structure or weekly structure, similar communications, and set due dates. In the case of a capstone project, we recommend including an announcement at the beginning of the semester to give learners time to plan.

The second stage of the digital divide is related to use (Hohlfeld et al., 2008). Some learners are not able to use technology efficiently despite having access. Usability is affected by the diversity of students in higher education and the fast-changing technology. When students have access to course materials and tools, is everyone able to use them in the same way? It is important to think of the digital divide as multidimensional (Chipeva et al., 2018) where individual factors such as gender (Mumporeze & Prieler, 2017), personality traits, and socio-cultural factors among many others also play a big role.

Here are a few steps designers could take to address disparities in usage. First, if you are proposing that students use a tool that they choose, consider providing one or two examples with instructions. Learners might not know where to find a tool, so we recommend providing a curated list of accepted locations to look for a checklist of parameters that learners can use to make decisions. Similarly, provide usage instructions for any additional tool required. Finally, when assigning tasks that require use of a new platform, social media for example, keep in mind that not all users are comfortable or familiar with these tools. To mitigate any difficulty, provide alternatives or options and consider the time that a user needs to spend on a certain tool.

When it comes to the last stage of the digital divide defined by Hohlfeld et al. (2008) as empowerment it is important to think about the different roles of online users and the impact of participation equality.

Studies described the different roles of online users. Kamalodeen and Jameson-Charles (2016) analyzed the roles that teachers play in online communities and suggested that users have one of these five roles: content consumers, window-shoppers, content producers, collaborators, and leaders, while Risser and Bottoms (2014) used the terms newbies and celebrities to describe teachers' roles. Other researchers used different terms to describe user roles. For example, Choi et al. (2015), who analyzed user roles on Reddit, identified users as initiators, commentators, attractors, or translators. Similarly, Füller et al. (2014) identified six user types that they called socializers, idea generators, masters, efficient contributors, and passive idea generators. More recently, Akar and Mardikyan (2018) found that users could be either visitors, socializers, content generators, or passive members.

Regardless of the descriptors given to the online users and their roles, there was a consensus among researchers that not all users have the same contributions to online content (Muller et al., 2010). Participation inequality refers to the low percentage of active online participants (contributors) compared to silent users (lurkers). Contributors are participants who post online, whereas lurkers are those participants who browse content and seldom make their own posts. Some examples of this behaviour are found in posts to blogs, LinkedIn, Wikipedia, book reviews, TEDTalks, Google searches, and social media. As framed by Haklay (2016),

*The overwhelming majority of people who use the information or are registered to the service do not contribute any information to it. The proportion of registered people who do not contribute can reach 90% or even more of the total number of users. Of the remaining participants, the vast majority contribute infrequently or fairly little—these account for 9% or more of the users. Finally, the last 1% contribute most of the information (p. 36).*

Participation inequality is relevant to instructional designers who are asking learners to look for online resources, as those learners will be exposed to the postings of a small percentage of users. To mitigate against it, give the students direction. For example, students could be given a list of accepted resources or provided with resources to critically reflect on the content that they are finding. The first author adopts this technique in her courses. She provides the students with a list of resources as a first step, in addition, the author allows the students to choose their resources and provides them with a check-in opportunity where they can submit the resources they would like to use and receive feedback.

## Communication

Communication plays a central role, particularly in online classes. As an instructional designer, thinking about communication from a social justice lens will help you create a safe space and will allow students to make connections throughout the course to you, to the content, and to their colleagues. Whether you are designing the course, coaching instructors, or teaching the course, we have collected recommendations that can be applied to create social justice communication.

We base our recommendations on three theoretical frameworks: the online pedagogy of care (Burke & Larmar, 2020), the community of inquiry (Garrison & Akyol, 2013), and Moore's (1989) model of interaction. We expand upon them to include recommendations for social justice. We invite you to ask yourself if you have made it easy and safe for learners to reach out to you and if you have provided ways for learners to reach you if they have concerns about course content or interactions with other learners. Our recommendations cover setting the tone of the class and establishing contact protocols.

First, use anti-oppression statements to set the tone of the class and create identity-safe classrooms. Use pronouns to introduce yourself. Fuentes et al. (2021) encouraged instructors to "define intersectionality in the syllabus for their students, explain the role of institutionalized oppression within society, and enter an agreement with their students to do their best to not recreate systemic oppression within the classroom" (p. 74). Second, make it clear to learners how and when they can contact you or the course instructor and when they could expect a reply. Two methods that have worked well for us are to include a Contact Us tab in the learning management system or to establish a Q&A forum and populate it with questions, where the contact information is the first question. Third, explain to students how, when, and why they can contact you to report any concerning incidents in class (including those that arise from your own

behaviours). Finally, acknowledge the complexities of students' lives. This advice is modelled after Burke and Larmar's (2020) online pedagogy of care. Based on that acknowledgment, we recommend that Instructional designers use the pedagogy of care when checking in on students. For example, ask them if they are okay when they are late on submissions, and use restorative practice for missed work.

## Content

The content that you as the instructional designer choose to include in your course allows you to architect a social justice class. Questions you should consider include the following: Do you have a wide representation in your course material? How affordable are the course materials? How do you portray to your students that your course is a safe space?

Having thought about these questions, our recommendation is to include EDI content, affordable content, and additional content. You can ensure EDI content by including diverse authors, perspectives, and ideas. Beware of oversimplification by including only some diverse content, and keep in mind that social justice education is not merely adding diverse content but raising critical consciousness about it. We invite you to consider what hidden curriculum you are using in your classroom and what hidden rules the students might perceive.

As for affordable content, consider choosing low-cost course materials. For example, select earlier editions of books or find open educational resources instead of high-cost books. An additional method to make your content aligned with social justice practices is to add a toolbox that connects the learners in your course to resources on campus. These resources could include support provided to ethnic minorities, LGBTQ2+, international students, and other potentially marginalized groups on campus. This gesture shows your students that you care and that it is safe for them to reach out to you. The first author found success in creating a space where students can suggest their own resources written by or representing minority groups. The first author created a folder in the learning management system called additional resources and students provided relevant and updated resources that some were included in the following versions of the course.

## Flexibility

Flexible learning is centred around learner empowerment. This model of learning provides a new framework for the power frames in the academic context and allows for more contribution from the students (Ryan & Tilbury, 2013). There are two guiding principles behind our recommendation for flexibility: The first is that learners play an active role in their learning and the second is that learners bring valuable perspectives and experience to the classroom. Based on these principles, we recommend using co-construction and choice as a base for engaging and empowering students. Allowing students to co-construct the course gives value to their voices. Similarly, giving choice to students allows them to take ownership of their own learning.

Consider how learners could take ownership of the course, whether they have a choice to do so, and whose voice is being heard. Based on these considerations, we recommend providing opportunities for students to co-construct the class guidelines, the content, and/or the assessment protocols. Incorporating flexible learning is a daunting task, and therefore we recommend that instructional designers start small by choosing one task at a time.

Based on flexibility principles (Hart, 2000), areas (Palmer, 2011), and dimensions (Nikolova & Collis, 1998), we suggest four recommendations to provide flexibility that reflect social justice in their design. First, provide opportunities for students to take part in developing classroom guidelines and group work protocols. Second, allow students to co-create the curriculum by bringing value from their communities and their own experiences. Learners bring with them a wealth of knowledge, views, and perspectives that could be built upon as a liaison to their communities and families. For example, use an inquiry-based approach where learners ask a question that relates to their own community, or where they are asked to apply the content of the course to solve a challenge they see in their communities. Third, apply flexibility to your assignments and assessments (Irwin & Hepplestone, 2012). You could provide a choice for your students in the type of assessment they choose, the percentage assigned to it, or the topic of their assignment.

If you wish to make it easier for students to choose, you can include explanations about the outcome that students are looking for. For example, a statement could explain that students interested in creating a product to use later might prefer a portfolio assessment and students who prefer conversational assessment might prefer to choose an oral assessment.

Finally, to ensure equity of assessment for students coming from non-mainstream cultures or migrant families, we recommend culturally responsive assessment. Culturally responsive assessment needs constant dialogue and constant reflection. It creates a space where students feel safe asking questions and where their prior knowledge is accounted for (Stevens, 2012).

We have two recommendations to help instructional designers create culturally relevant assessments. The first author has been using syllabus annotation with her students. This technique allowed her to connect with the students and engage them around the syllabus. Students commented on what they thought about the assessment and they posted questions. This created a safe space for the students. Kalir and Perez (2019) and Kalir et al. (2020) are good resources to explore if you wish to learn more about social annotation of the syllabus.

The second technique focuses on using student-centered assessment. We recommend creating opportunities for students to be involved in the assessment creation. This could take the form of student-generated assessment (Yu, 2012), student-generated exam questions, and rubric co-creation with students. You can learn more about rubric co-creation with students from recent research such as Kilgour et al. (2020) and Bacchus et al. (2020).

## Feedback-Seeking

Learners can provide designers with the most accurate feedback. Although it is a common practice to seek course evaluation, we recommend seeking feedback related to classroom climate and reflecting on that feedback. Feedback-seeking is the deliberate asking for input from participants. Ashford and Cummings (1983) first identified two modes of feedback-seeking, monitoring and inquiry. Monitoring happens when designers are attentive to the environment and recognize cues, whereas inquiry requires actively looking for responses from learners. Ashford et al. (2003) identified five aspects of feedback-seeking that included the method, the frequency, the timing, the target, and the topic. We would like to add an additional aspect related to actions following the feedback.

We invite instructional designers to consider if they have built monitoring or inquiry feedback into the course, if the feedback-seeking is inviting to the students, and if feedback is being sought about social justice aspects. Instructional designers should also determine what actions to take after receiving the feedback. Our recommendations are centred around critical consciousness. Thus, we recommend devising opportunities for students to provide feedback at different times, including space for them to provide feedback informally. When feedback is sought, ask direct questions related to the course tone, the diversity of the course content, and how safe students felt to contact the course designer and/or instructor. Lastly, after receiving feedback, we recommend using the data to check positionality and critically reflect on choices made in the course.

## Conclusion

We used this paper to provide practical advice to instructional designers, specifically in higher education, to design their courses from a social justice lens. Our first recommendation was to check one's own positionality and critically reflect on the role that positionality plays in designing a course. Following the self-reflection, we grouped our recommendations into five sections: inclusivity, communication, content, flexibility, and feedback-seeking. We provided a theoretical background for each of the sections in addition to considerations and recommendations to align each section with social justice.

We realize that a learning design that incorporates social justice cannot be achieved through a prescriptive list. We also realize that the recommendations we suggest are overwhelming and not easy to implement all at once. To that end, we advise instructional designers to take a critical, step-by-step approach to the recommendations. Implementing social

justice in course design is a journey of learning and self-reflection. Finally, we would like to acknowledge that social justice in education is a work in progress. Given that the field of social justice is continuously growing, we plan to include deeper considerations of each of these areas, as well as our recommendations on culturally responsive design and trauma-informed pedagogies, in our future research.

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