

## Book Review: The Hidden Curriculum of Online Learning: Understanding Social Justice through Critical Pedagogy

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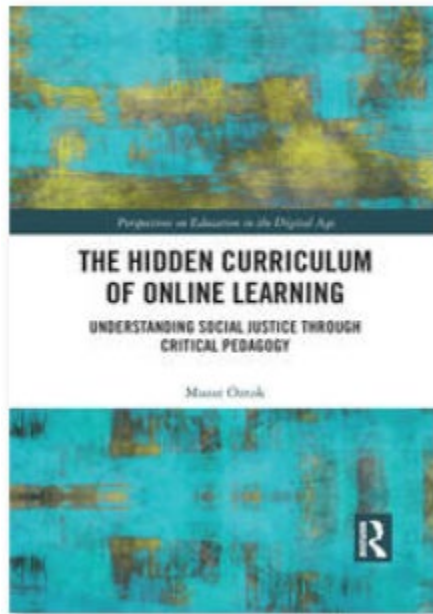
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## Book Review: The Hidden Curriculum of Online Learning: Understanding Social Justice through Critical Pedagogy



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Öztok's critical ethnography work, *The Hidden Curriculum of Online Learning: Understanding Social Justice Through Critical Pedagogy*, helps to fill a concerning gap in the online learning literature. Öztok argues that online learning literature is frequently positivist and apolitical with little emphasis on how learners make meaning of their experience or how learners are embedded in power hierarchies (p. 9). While this book contributes significantly to that epistemological gap in the online learning literature, it does not, nor should it, fill that hole entirely. Additional research is needed to explore learners' experiences in other contexts; perhaps more importantly, online learning scholars need to find ways to use research like this to improve learning experiences for students, especially those typically subjected to power differentials.

The purpose of *The Hidden Curriculum of Online Learning: Understanding Social Justice Through Critical Pedagogy* is to document how students experience online learning in terms of equity. Öztok carefully interrogates the term equity and how it operationalizes in online learning. Online learning is frequently thought of as an equalizer that provides access to education for those who might otherwise be excluded (Anderson, 2008; Harasim, 2000). However, as Öztok argues, this is equality more than equity (p. 6). This critical ethnography explores how online learning maintains cultural hegemony, as defined by Gramsci (Forgacs, 2000). In the book's conclusion, Öztok notes that his overall intention was to challenge how equity is defined in online learning (p. 112). Öztok meets that goal, which will hopefully help shape research designs going forward.

This book is divided into six chapters. The first chapter, “Genealogy of the Concepts and the Myths of Equity in Online Learning,” provides the context for critical research in online learning. The second chapter, “How to Study Equity in Online Spaces: Situating the Theoretical Frameworks,” lays out Öztok’s argument and the theory that he integrates to support it. The next three chapters look at specific components of the theoretical framework. Chapter 3, “Writing Oneself into Online Being: The Art of Self-Representation and Impression Management,” explores how learners craft their identity in an online environment, similar to Goffman’s impression management theory (Goffman, 1956). Chapter 4, “Hierarchy of Privilege: Self as Curriculum of Diversity and Otherness,” provides the richest ethnographic detail, looking at how diversity is performed in the classroom. Chapter 5, “Sociocultural Production of Self: Social Presence and Social Absence,” dives into social presence. Öztok has published articles on social presence including a call for the term to be reconsidered in the online learning literature (Öztok & Kehrwald, 2017). The last chapter of this book, “Hidden Curriculum of Online Learning: Discourses of Whiteness, Social Absence, and Inequity,” brings the entire argument together.

The most compelling argument in this book centers on the term social absence. The first substantive mention of social absence in the literature outside of Öztok’s dissertation is in Öztok’s (2014) presentation at the annual meeting of the Association of Internet Researchers. Previous uses of the term, such as Potter (2004), were glib references to complete non-participation in a class. In *The Hidden Curriculum of Online Learning: Understanding Social Justice Through Critical Pedagogy*, social absence is defined as “the extent to which particular identifications are not represented in one’s online being” (p. 25). Öztok goes on to provide powerful interview excerpts where students describe leaving out key parts of their identity in efforts to fit in or make other students more comfortable. For some students, this means downplaying the non-Canadian aspects of their identity such as their Middle Eastern heritage. For others, downplaying their heritage is a consequence of being linked to the Canadian part of their hyphenated identity rather than standing alone as, for example, an Indian-Canadian. For the white Canadian students of British heritage in the study, social absence was not relevant; those students did not pick and choose aspects of their identity to present consciously as minority students did. The idea of social absence provides a useful heuristic to balance the frequently discussed concept of social presence in online learning.

*The Hidden Curriculum of Online Learning: Understanding Social Justice Through Critical Pedagogy* is rich in theory, but it offers few methodological insights. Öztok describes how he could not accomplish the Geertzian goal of ethnographic research as deeply hanging out (Geertz, 1998) and traditional ethnographic strategies had to be modified for the online learning context. He draws on analytics of learner use of the learning management system as a form of participant observation (p. 31). The reasoning behind this is sound, but little detail is provided. As ethnography of online learning is relatively new, the reader would have benefitted from more methodological detail than is provided by Öztok.

*The Hidden Curriculum of Online Learning: Understanding Social Justice Through Critical Pedagogy* is an exciting contribution to the online learning literature bringing a needed critical perspective. Hopefully this is the start of an expanded direction for online learning research. With a body of qualitative research exploring how students experience power hierarchies in online learning, the field will be able to focus on how to improve that experience for all learners.

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