

Informal Learning and the Social Justice Practices of Academic Leaders as Invisible and Visible Pedagogical Inputs in Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

This paper calls attention to the need to foster an understanding of the intersection of informal learning and social justice issues during the training of academic leaders (professors and administrators) and makes the case for academic leaders to take cognizance of informal learning in their social justice practices. The author posits that the intersection of informal learning and social justice issues/practices are important in(visible) pedagogical inputs in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), and this nexus affects students' success.

KEY WORDS: *Academic leaders, informal learning, social justice, higher education institutions*

Introduction

Informal learning is central to our lives and it is pervasive. We learn, informally, right from birth until our last moments on earth - that is, from cradle to grave. There is a need to understand the presence and processes of informal learning in the formal school system, especially in higher education institutions. Informal learning could have either positive or negative outcomes and it is often through informal learning that unconscious and hidden bias (including stereotypes and prejudices) about persons who are different from the mainstream or 'us' could be learned or unlearned (Fashina, 2001; Mejiuni, 2013a; Mejiuni, Cranton, & Taiwo, 2015; Schugurensky, 2015). Unconscious and hidden biases that are left unchallenged would usually become our frames of reference which may later be noticed and changed or may be noticed and reinforced through deliberate forms of informal learning - that is, explicit and self-directed learning (Mejiuni, 2013a; Mejiuni, Cranton, & Taiwo, 2015). What then is informal learning: its ingredients and pillars?

The Concept of Informal Learning

Informal learning is experiential, incidental and/or unstructured, non-institutional learning (Mejiuni, Cranton, & Taiwo, 2015). Hrimech (2005), Livingstone (2000), and Marsick and Volpe (1999), Mejiuni, Cranton, and Taiwo (2015) wrote that informal learning is the construction, co-construction, or acquisition of new knowledge, understanding, skills or attitudes, which people undertake whether consciously or unconsciously. The writers further stated, "When it is a conscious process, the control of what, how, where, and when to learn rests with the learner. When it is an unconscious process, the locus of control is diffused and the process usually does not involve *teaching* by persons specially designated as facilitators, instructors, or teachers" (p. xxiv). Based broadly on the criteria of intentionality and awareness, Schugurensky (2000) provided a typology of informal learning, comprising self-directed learning, incidental learning, and tacit learning. From his typology and the different forms of informal learning identified in the literature, Mejiuni, Cranton, and Taiwo (2015) identified four types of informal learning—tacit learning, incidental learning, explicit learning, and self-directed learning—which they posited as occurring on a continuum, ranging from the very implicit form, which is tacit learning to the most explicit form, which is self-directed learning.

They described tacit learning as the most ubiquitous form of unconscious informal learning which unfolds mainly through living, socialisation, and spontaneous apprehension of knowledge and information as part of everyday life. They opined that it is through tacit learning that persons pick up much of their outlook on the world both good - kindness to strangers, and bad - racism, homophobia, and sexism. It is possible for persons to pass through life, from cradle to grave, and not notice, pay attention to, and reflect on their tacit knowledge.

Mejiuni, Cranton, and Taiwo (2015) described incidental learning as “learning that we are not aware of when it occurs but is acknowledged later on reflection upon incidents, practices, and processes that we have participated in or witnessed. It is a form of unconscious informal learning” (xlili). They described explicit learning as a form of deliberate learning, which is “not marked by the same level of deliberative intensity as self-directed learning” (xlii).

Concerning self-directed learning, Mejiuni, Cranton, and, Taiwo (2015) wrote that it is learning in which individuals make decisions about their learning, within formal, non-formal, and informal learning contexts; these are also called independent learning projects, in the sense that individuals deliberately engage in learning ventures that are of interest to them, accessing resources and defining the structure of their learning. The writers also stated that when self-directed learning takes place in informal learning contexts, it is referred to as autodidaxy. While tacit and incidental learning are unconscious forms of informal learning, explicit and self-directed learning are deliberate forms of informal learning.

In the literature, the spaces in which different forms of informal learning have occurred were educational, and in the main, non-educational contexts, as well as economic spaces, social spaces, cyber spaces, and physical spaces (Akinsooto & Mejiuni, 2014; Avoseh, 2001; English, 2015; Jubas, 2011; Lin & Cranton, 2015; Marsick, Fernández de Álava, & Watkins, 2015; Mejiuni, 2013a; Obilade & Mejiuni, 2006; Starr-Glass, 2015; Walden, 2015). Mejiuni, Cranton, and Taiwo (2015) articulated that while informal learning is a distinct type of learning, it also interacts with and is present in organised and structured teaching-learning interactions and contexts in the formal school system and in non-formal education. Therefore, it is an important part of the education network/system, albeit a beggared cousin. Specifically, when informal learning (tacit learning) takes place during teaching-learning interactions, this is called “the hidden curriculum” (Garret, 1987, p. 81).

Through an exploration of the literature, some case examples, and the author’s twenty years’ experience engaging with one type of social justice issue in formal and non-formal education contexts, the author posits that the intersection of informal learning and social justice issues/practices is an important in(visible) pedagogical input in higher education institutions, and the nexus has the capacity to affect students’ success. In the paragraphs which follow, the author explores the concept of social (in)justice and its dimensions in higher education institutions (HEIs) and examines the nexus of informal learning and social justice within the structures, cultures, programmes, and processes of HEIs as a way of drawing attention to the specific areas requiring the consideration of academic leaders.

The Concept of Social (In)justice

Social justice means non-discrimination on the basis of sex, class, race, ethnicity, creed, age, sexual orientation, disability/able-bodiedness, and so on. One could also read this definition as non-discrimination on the basis of difference or identity, be it natural or constructed. Marshall (1998) wrote that to discriminate is to treat unfairly. The notion and practice of discrimination includes attribution of characteristics to individuals and groups, characteristics, which, when socially and institutionally applied to groups of individuals, define their rights and duties, which then affect the quality of their lives (Wiley, 1994). Discrimination involves unequal opportunities to access resources (usually stemming from social and institutional(ised) prejudices), and unequal and unfair distribution of rights and resources.

Social injustice or discrimination also takes the forms of minimising, trivialising, and non-recognition of the issues (Calhoun, 1994; Mejiuni, 2005), concerns, experiences, interests, and needs of individuals and groups

who are minorities - that is, those who are different from the majority or mainstream. Finally, to discriminate is to dominate (Marshall, 1998), to insist on prioritising by fiat the interests and needs of a group over those of others. Such prioritisation would usually not have a rational basis; it is usually steeped in unconscious or hidden bias (prejudices) and, subsequently, explicitly enforced through subtle or overt exercise of power. The group that dominates and prioritises its interests and needs would then usually also go on to enforce its own values, beliefs, moral precepts, and moral defaults (Gouldner, 1970 as cited in Marshall, 1998) through state, institutional, and communal structures. The dimensions of social injustice, therefore, range from the seemingly innocuous to abuse and outright violence, all of which impact negatively on the well-being of those who are different - that is, those whose interests and values are not mainstream – and who are treated unfairly or unjustly.

Nations, institutions, and groups have tried to address social injustice or inequities through laws, policies, multiculturalism, and critical multicultural education, as well as by other methods. Space restricts our exploration of the initiatives. Educational institutions, especially HEIs, being important cultural institutions that prepare generations of persons for work and civic and community engagement, have contributed to initiatives to end social injustice through teaching and training, research, publications, and advocacy/activism (Cambren-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005; DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014; Mejiuni & Bateye, 2016; Mejiuni, Obilade, & Associates, 2012; Miller & Martin, 2015; Theoharis, 2007; Trujillo & Cooper, 2014). However, social justice issues persist in HEIs even as the institutions contribute to ending social injustice in their immediate and larger communities. The author provides case examples of the issues in the next section.

Social Justice Issues in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) HEIs

- In 1991, Dr. Frances Conley, tired of being called ‘honey’ by male surgeons, resigned from Stanford University Medical School because of sexism. Dr Conley was the first woman to be tenured full professor of neurosurgery at a medical school in the US. After years of enduring sexism at Stanford University Medical School, and instead of appointing her as departmental chair, Stanford University Medical School passed her over for a male neurosurgeon. Dr. Conley resigned. She said the male colleague was a poor leader who would foster a hostile environment for all women. After her resignation, she authored the book, *Walking Out on the Boys*. She eventually withdrew her resignation and returned to her job. (<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,973360-3,00.html#ixzz0xl1mMzz7>)
- Recently, at a social outing with a group of young African students and professionals in a major European city, this author listened as the young women shared their experiences of racism in the lecture rooms of their College. They cited examples of science professors who, during their lectures, declared that ‘tuberculosis came to Europe from Africa’ and ‘Nigeria is a large country, and many Nigerians have HIV/AIDS.’
- Early in 2018, a graduate of the medical school of the author’s university, on her facebook page, alleged that her former lecturer sexually harassed her over a decade ago, denting her results with F – grades. A classmate of hers, who had a similar experience with the same lecturer, and who had to withdraw from the university for the same reason, to start medical school all over again in a Caribbean University, corroborated the story of the first woman. (<https://punchng.com/sexual-harassment-uk-grenada-varsities-probe-ex-oau-lecturer/>)

Persons who have studied and worked in higher education institutions will not be surprised about the cases of social injustice cited above. They seem familiar. Even then, theorists, scholars, and activists would be interested in how institutions handled the cases of persons who experienced discrimination when and if official complaints were lodged and the structures that have been put in place to ensure that discrimination is eliminated. Recently, Akinsooto (2017), documented female undergraduates’ strategies of escaping sexual harassment. The strategies they had learned informally included ensuring lecturers do not notice them in class and in the faculty, using the ‘hijab’, and hiding their identities during examinations.

This kind of harassment is occurring at an institution that the author thought had made 'bold and progressive' moves by approving a Sexual Harassment Policy for the university, one of the few universities in Nigeria to take the step. In their assessment of the implementation of the gender equity policy of the same university where Akinsoto carried out his study, Obafemi Awolowo University, Muoghalu and Eboiyehi (2018), indicated that the policy has yielded little or no tangible improvements in gender balancing in respect of student enrolment, employment, and in decision-making processes in the University since it was formulated in 2009. In rule-governed societies, policies and laws ought to work for social justice. But even in those societies, negative attitudes to 'others' and prejudices remain fossilised in many minds and institutions. So in spite of policies and laws against discriminatory practices, where they exist, negative attitudes and prejudices remain. Mejiuni (2013a) attributes this state of affairs to the preservative nature of power, and the interaction of formal, non-formal, and informal learning processes within formal education systems and the interaction of non-formal and informal learning in non-educational contexts outside the walls of formal schools.

In the last section of this work, the author explores the nexus of informal learning and social justice in the structures, cultures, programmes, and processes of HEIs as a way of drawing attention to the specific areas requiring the consideration of academic leaders.

The Nexus of Informal Learning and Social Justice in the Structures, Cultures, Programmes, and Processes of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)

Wang, Russo, and Bryan (2014) cited examples of state actors and businessmen academic leaders' interference in the curriculum of state schools and universities in the United States of America, such that students and teachers/lecturers cannot engage some social justice issues (gender, race, sex education) in their formal classroom interactions. In Nigeria, a government agency, the National Universities Commission (NUC), sets the Basic Minimum Academic standards for academic programmes and has been criticised for this actions and others (Mejiuni, 2014). If we recall the meaning of social injustice as articulated earlier in this article, the exclusion of social injustice issues from the school curriculum is itself, discriminatory. This interference in Nigeria and the United States ignores the curriculum development processes within university structures, and the needs and interests of persons from diverse backgrounds who attend the universities. The development of a curriculum for a programme begins from an academic unit (usually as a result of several years of research and engagement with the subject), and it is examined and debated through the relevant academic committees to the Senate of the college and ratified by the governing council (Mejiuni, 2013b).

One needs to state that the existence of these structures, in and of themselves, is not a guarantee of equity. Critical theorists would actually regard the structures as hegemonic (Brookfield, 2005). The relevant questions would be as follows:

- How do members of academic communities become members of the organs that take key decisions in HEIs? Is it by appointment, election, promotion, and/or hierarchy?
- How can a social justice perspective be brought into these structures?
- Who participates in decision-making processes, which voices are loud and heard, and which ones are silent especially from a gender perspective, the perspectives of persons with disabilities, and persons of different ethnicities, creeds, races, and sexual orientations?
- When some categories of persons are excluded from or included in these structures, what tacit and incidental learning results?

Higher Education Institution Culture

Higher Education Institutions' cultures include the practices, beliefs and norms, codes of behaviour, and the language of the institution. If, as Tylor (1871) as cited in Marshall (1998) indicated, culture is "a *learned* complex of knowledge, belief, art, morals, law and custom" (p.137), then the process of enculturation is the process of informal learning. Are the cultures of HEIs discriminatory? Take, for instance, language, apprenticeship, or mentorship models, and quid quo pro cultures. Are the policies and processes of promotion, discipline, and training/continuing professional development opportunities well known to all? How are members of the community being implicitly taught to interact with processes that are opaque?

Higher Education Institution Curriculum (Programmes, Programme Contents, and Teaching-Learning Processes).

There are relevant questions that should be addressed. Are there social justice, diversity and inclusion, disabilities, sexualities, gender studies programmes in the institutions? Do the teaching-learning processes, strategies and contents of all programmes in the HEI reinforce discrimination or non-discrimination? Mejiuni (2013a) wrote that female students complained about how they were edged out of participation in practicals and how lecturers picked on them in classes. Mejiuni (2013a), however, showed that while some women who went through higher education have picked lessons (through 'the hidden curriculum' and incidental learning) that disempowered them from the formal school context and teaching-learning interactions, others have gained power by interpreting lessons that were meant to disempower them positively. Mejiuni and Obilade (2006), citing Lutrell (1997) and Maduka (1991), wrote that: ". . . some indigenous/first-nations communities, women, and poor people fear schools and feel vulnerable in schools since for them, schools represent authority that impose particular world views, devalue their persons and their knowledge, and make them feel unworthy and unwanted and thus out of place in schools" (p. 140). So the absence of the experiences, interests and needs of women, persons with disabilities, and members of first-nation communities from the curriculum leads to exclusion, alienation, and even to some dropping-out of formal schooling.

One of the ways of reducing student alienation and apprehending informal learning that has resulted in negative outcomes such as sexism and racism is to be attentive to learners' informal learning. Cranton, Taiwo, and Mejiuni (2015) argued for respecting and honouring learners' informal learning when it holds the possibility of serving as a precondition for, a complement to, and a supplement for formal and non-formal learning because it blurs the disconnection (and sometimes alienation) that learners sometimes feel between formal/organised instruction and daily living. Cranton, Taiwo, and Mejiuni (2015) did not argue that educators not only should be attentive to learners' informal learning, but that they also should model informal learning practices. The writers contended that if university teachers model how to respect and honour informal learning for positive outcomes, especially for social justice, they would be implicitly and explicitly teaching their students how to notice, reflect on, analyse, and/or honour and respect informal learning in their own practice. Educators can also tap into the strengths that different individuals and groups bring into the teaching-learning context. As a result, they should be able to recognise the challenges that may occur in different learning situations.

The social justice and inclusion lens could also be brought to examine the following: knowledge production and dissemination frameworks, processes and goals, safe and non-threatening teaching-learning interactions and contexts, and the opportunities diverse groups of professors have to become academic leaders.

This author did not approach this essay with the belief that all professors and administrators believe that social injustice is intolerable. However, it would be assumed that the evidence of the negative impact of discrimination and superior arguments; the need to create safe and non-threatening environment for teaching, learning, research, and innovation; and the need to obey the law and abide by policies that are in place, if they are enacted in place, would convince academic leaders to take social justice issues seriously.

Conclusion

Informal learning, social justice, and inequities co-exist in the same contexts or spaces: homes, work places, the streets, market places, religious places, educational institutions, and state institutions. If informal learning is as pervasive as we have described it, then any subject matter, skills, attitudes, and beliefs, including discriminatory attitudes and practices, could be learned. Academic leaders, therefore, need to reckon informal learning and social justice as invisible and visible pedagogical inputs in their HEIs. Specifically, they need to be attentive to the positive and negative dimensions of informal learning as they encourage inclusivity and egalitarianism, and as they respect differences in decision-making processes in preparing professors for leadership positions in their research, in curriculum preparation and teaching-learning processes, in providing safe and non-threatening teaching-learning environments, and in providing workplace and learning cultures that empower students and professors.

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