Exploring the presence of marginalized populations in OER texts dealing with matters of EDI

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Abstract: The purpose of this research is to build on the growing body of literature that seeks to identify how often OER material used in higher education references historically marginalized groups in matters pertaining to EDI with an emphasis given to the contexts in which they are mentioned. The guiding research question of the study posits that EDI discussions within OER unintentionally place added emphasis on certain marginalized population groups while others are routinely overlooked.

Introduction

Open educational resources (OER) are often extolled for their capability to equalize higher education by alleviating the associated costs that disproportionately affects people of color and other marginalized populations (McCabe and Jackson, 2016), yet the literature surrounding how they incorporate social justice issues to represent marginalized groups is sparse and largely non-existent. A noted area of contention lies in just how few existing studies into the matter establish a connection between the increased participation of these populations at the university level and their inclusion within the course material being used (Lambert, 2018). This is further supported by research indicating that the presence of marginalized groups within OER mimics traditional textbooks in that they are systematically underrepresented and even omitted from certain historical contexts completely (Brandle, 2020). Thus, the purpose of this study is to build on the growing body of literature that seeks to identify how often OER material used at the university level references historically marginalized groups in matters pertaining to equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI).

Impetus for OER Content to Be More Inclusive

Despite established connections to implied themes of social justice both in theory and practical discourse, there is a scarcity of studies on the topic of diversity in representation and authorship within OER as the central element of discussion (Seiferle-Valencia, 2020). Therefore, research into how OER plays a role in expanding accessibility is still in its infancy which means significantly more needs to be done in this regard to support its ability to be inclusive and equitable for all learners. In response, Lambert (2018) proposes a social justice focused definition of Open Education that is aligned with one or more of the three principles of redistributive, recognitive, and representational justice so that new empirical studies can be conducted to measure the impact of initiatives to provide marginalized learners with more resources, recognition, and representation.

In the same way that society uses models of communication to subtly instill the values of its dominant groups upon the greater populace, the ideology and discourse used in academic texts become part of the greater normative culture surrounding academia. This hidden curriculum plays a large role in the process that socializes students, their identities, and how they perceive the world (Lapum et al., 2022). As a result, students belonging to relegated groups are taught that their cultures and histories are not important and are thus barred from the greater societal conversation resulting in decreased opportunities for academic and professional success (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Conversely, studies have shown that modified content has been linked to an increase in student's overall satisfaction with their coursework as well as a heightened sense of belonging which serves to bolster their motivation and engagement within academia (Nusbaum, 2020). Doing so has the added benefit of enhancing social empathy by expanding critical consciousness by helping people discern situations in a new light after experiencing an emotional connection through another person's lived experience (Powell et al., 2020). Consequently, dedication to inclusion provides benefits that extend beyond the marginalized groups being included since a plurality of perspectives expands the collective knowledge and understanding of the world as a result.

Methodology

This study is replicative in nature since it adapts the methods of previous studies by employing a qualitative approach and descriptive statistics to obtain data. It consists of a full-text content analysis of selected OER tied to current EDI topics within specified academic fields using a list of unique terms that are coded to associate with selected historically marginalized groups. This data was then compiled into a categorization dictionary along with the record of their resultant instances within the selected texts to identify which populations are

receiving priority focus. These results serve to establish how much coverage the groups receive collectively and in relation to one another, which can then be expanded upon to determine trends of representation within OER.

Population group categories and demographic terms

The population groups chosen for this study consist of marginalized communities that are traditionally excluded from mainstream social, economic, and educational life based on race (African American, Asian American/Pacific Islander, Latinx, Native American, Middle Eastern), gender (female), sexual orientation (LGBTQ+), and persons with disabilities. Additionally, a general category was created to encompass catch-all terms that relate to the greater marginalized populations as a whole and are thus not tied to one demographic exclusively. Careful consideration was given towards selecting various demographic terms that are widely used in both academia and the common-English language to represent the different population groups being studied. Most terms stem from online publications and databases that explore definitions of ethnicity, race, and social justice such as those offered by the National Education Association (NEA Center for Social Justice) and the Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health (Bhopal, 2004) while others were subsequently found within the OER texts themselves and were added accordingly.

OER texts used in study

The initial stage of the study focused on selecting a sample of pertinent OER texts that met defined criteria using the advanced search functions offered within four popular OER databases (OER Commons, OpenStax, MERLOT, and EdTech Books). Search parameters focused on instructional textbooks that are available with unrestricted user licenses developed for university level and equivalent higher-ed courses in the subject areas of education, arts and humanities, and the social sciences. Qualifying content was restricted to full text offerings, so no other form of media was considered. Search results were then subjected to further individual scrutinization to ensure content is relevant and fits the parameters of this study with extra consideration being given to those that were specifically focused on cultural studies that are tied to the human element in relation to matters of EDI.

Each text was screened to ensure discussions within were purposely centered around the different population groups instead of tangentially as part of wider thematic studies. Additionally, consideration was given to the selection of a wide variety of texts across the different subject areas to provide a suitably sized sample of genres to minimize potential overlap of topics being discussed. The rationale for using this method is that it leverages several ranking devices within popular OER databases to identify a wide-assortment of relevant samples of OER texts intended for instructional use within higher-educational EDI discussions while allowing for an in-depth analysis of the target populations mentioned within.

Findings

Taken as a whole, the population group that received the most mentions across the selected OER (see Table 1) were Women followed by African Americans and then General representing a cumulative total of 72.46% of all in-text citations. Collectively, the remaining six population groups received far less attention with a combined total reflecting only 27.54% of the cumulative in-text references.

Table 1
Mentions of Population Groups Across Chosen OER

Population Group Category	Total Number of Entries	% of In-Text References
African American	3430	21.52%
Asian American/Pacific Islander	676	4.24%
Persons w/ Disabilities	489	3.07%
Latinx	800	5.02%
LGBTQ+	1118	7.02%
Middle Eastern	294	1.85%
Native American	855	5.37%
General	3257	20.44%
Women	4860	30.50%

Discussion

While all the chosen OER texts dedicate substantial space to discussions centered around EDI topics pertaining to the different marginalized population groups of this study, it also becomes apparent that certain demographics receive substantially more attention than others. More specifically, it is the omissions of these groups from EDI discussions that are particularly telling. For example, while Asia is estimated to be home to 60% of the total world population, references to its inhabitants comprise only about 4% of the cumulative in-text references. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that many of the mentions of these same groups within the texts were of a historical nature thus very few discussions were centered on the ongoing issues these communities face today. Similarly, many discussions were of a statistical nature which showed how the different populations groups fare in comparison to one another in measures of economic success such as education and employment, yet doing so creates a tacit implication that some groups are not in as much need as the others since they are doing well in these specific measures. Such findings have often contributed to the myth of the "model minority" where certain populations are held to higher standards despite their facing many of the same discriminations of other minority groups.

While none of the OER texts specifically make this assertion, the lack of content relating to certain groups in EDI discussions nonetheless serves to reinforce notions that certain demographics are more deserving of attention which can lead to a disparity in real world outcomes due to unfounded generalizations that rise as a result. Worse yet, doing so often ignores the reality that many of the population groups represent diverse and varied cultures which can lead to misconceptions where the high-profile accomplishments of certain subgroups are subsequently extended to the greater community as a whole. The implications of these findings are not to suggest that any one group is underserving of the time and attention that they are receiving in ongoing EDI discussions. To the contrary, an argument could be made that there still remains a need for further representation of diverse perspectives in academic discussions if true equity is to be achieved. Thus, the data obtained within this study serves to reinforce claims that OER must extend its focus beyond issues of perceived need since doing so threatens to ignore or otherwise skew issues that other marginalized populations are facing which diminishes the likelihood that true equity can be achieved within academia as a result.

Future research

The implications of this study will help address future questions of what populations are receiving attention in discussions of EDI as well as help address which ones require further presence within OER texts being used in higher-ed.

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