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## DOMINANT PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES AND THE EPISTEMIC JUSTICE OF ONLINE LEARNING: A DISCOURSE

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### Abstract

This paper explores the intersection of dominant pedagogical practices and the concept of epistemic justice in the context of online learning. With the increasing prevalence of digital education, this paper examines how knowledge is constructed, disseminated and accessed in online learning environments. The discourse explores how prevailing pedagogical methods impact the distribution and recognition of knowledge, potentially perpetuating inequalities in online educational spaces. Drawing on Bernstein's theory of the pedagogic device, we identify and analyse various pedagogical approaches commonly employed in online learning. We investigate how these approaches may inadvertently reinforce existing power structures, marginalise certain voices and overlook diverse forms of knowledge representation. Emphasising the importance of epistemic justice, we elucidate the need to acknowledge and validate multiple knowledge systems, cultural perspectives and lived experiences within the online learning landscape. Furthermore, this discourse examines potential strategies and best practices for cultivating epistemically just online learning environments. It underscores the significance of inclusive curriculum design, diverse teaching methodologies and technology integration facilitating equitable knowledge exchange. By addressing the disparities inherent in dominant pedagogies, educators and policymakers can foster an environment that respects, empowers and accommodates the diverse epistemic contributions of students. We advocate for a paradigm shift in online learning towards embracing epistemic justice, thereby advancing a more equitable and inclusive educational experience for all participants. It calls for continued research, dialogue and collaboration to dismantle barriers and create an enriching digital learning environment that promotes epistemic diversity and equality.

*Keywords: Bernstein's theory of the pedagogic device, epistemic justice, online learning, pedagogical practices*

### Introduction and Background

Researchers like Pandey et al. (2022) and Zamani et al. (2022) focus on online learning, particularly online courses driven largely by the COVID-19 virus. While online learning offers numerous advantages, such as flexibility and mobility, it also carries some notable drawbacks that should not be disregarded. As Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) noted, one of the most glaring shortcomings is the lack of epistemic diversity and cultural relevance in online learning approaches. The concept of "epistemic variety" underscores the notion that multiple valid ways exist to acquire knowledge about the world, all of which deserve recognition and consideration. However, online educational institutions tend to prioritise Western scientific modes of knowledge acquisition, thus marginalising indigenous modes of knowledge and traditional indigenous wisdom within digital classrooms despite their critical relevance to sustainability and ecology, as Moyo et al. (2022) highlighted. It is our contention that the current state of online learning is deficient in terms of cultural sensitivity, hybridity and equitable access to knowledge, a viewpoint shared by Kirmayer and Jarvis (2019) and Gillett-Swan (2017).

According to Darling-Hammond et al. (2020), online courses adopt a uniform, one-size-fits-all approach to their design, failing to consider their student communities' diverse cultural backgrounds and life experiences. This

oversight can leave students feeling that their knowledge is not being meaningfully used, which, in turn, can diminish their motivation to learn. Given their potential to perpetuate existing power dynamics and inequalities, we view these shortcomings in online education as particularly concerning.

Online learning can reinforce certain groups' dominance while marginalising others, as it prioritises specific ways of knowing and cultural concepts (Lee, 2020). The consequences of this bias can be especially severe for students from marginalised communities. As a solution, we propose a reevaluation of the current paradigm of online learning through the lens of epistemic justice. The following section elucidates the theoretical framework underpinning this study.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Bernstein's theory of pedagogic device, which refers to the notion that how knowledge is conveyed in the classroom can either promote or limit the learning outcomes of students, especially those from different social classes, serves as the theoretical foundation for this study. He identified two types of discourse in education: elaborated code and restricted code. Elaborated code is characterised by a complex and varied use of language, while restricted code relies on more simplified and limited language (Jones, 2013). Bernstein (1975) maintains that the use of elaborate code is more common in middle-class education, while working-class education tends to rely more on restricted code.

Picciano (2017) notes that dominant pedagogical practices, including online learning, can reflect and reinforce educational linguistic and cultural differences. For example, online learning platforms may be designed with a specific audience in mind, such as students who are already proficient in the use of technology and digital media. This can create a barrier to access for students who are less familiar with these tools and may be more comfortable with traditional, face-to-face learning environments. According to Valkenburg (2022), epistemic justice ensures that knowledge is distributed fairly and equitably across different social groups. In the context of online learning, this means considering how educational institutions and practices can either promote or hinder access to knowledge for students from different backgrounds. Annala (2022) affirms that epistemic justice lies in the potential for pedagogical practices to either reproduce or challenge existing linguistic and cultural hierarchies. By considering the different ways in which students may experience online learning, we argue that educators can work to create a more just and inclusive learning environment for all. However, educators need to understand the concept of epistemic justice.

### **Epistemic Justice**

The concept of epistemic justice, as theorised by Valkenburg (2022) has recently gained appeal not just in the subject of epistemology but also in other fields such as sociology, anthropology and education. Mormina (2022) adds that epistemic justice is concerned with issues of knowledge and power because it aims to address how some individuals and groups are systematically excluded or marginalised from the creation and transmission of information. It aims to address the following issues in particular: Knowledge is not neutral or objective but subject to biases and injustices due to social and political circumstances. Social and political factors influence knowledge (Mormina, 2022). This is an issue of epistemic justice, which is concerned with knowing ethics and attempts to address these injustices.

It is an issue of epistemic justice when knowledge is produced and transmitted in ways that maintain or reinforce existing patterns of oppression and marginalisation (Hutchings, 2023). Mormina (2022) regards a distinguishing feature of epistemic justice as its emphasis on historically marginalised or underrepresented groups' perspectives and life experiences, which may be ignored or dismissed. Goriss-Hunter et al. (2023) maintains that to solve this issue, epistemic justice strives to integrate previously marginalised groups in creating new knowledge and extend the range of venues in which they can offer their own brand of expertise. Against this backdrop, we argue that activism can take many forms, such as advocating for more inclusive and diverse classrooms and workplaces and offering financial support for marginalised group research and education.

Pratt and de Vries (2023) opine that epistemic justice requires identifying and resolving the ways in which power and privilege influence knowledge development and distribution. A fundamental component of this core issue is recognising that dominant knowledge is typically associated with certain cultural and political institutions, and that these systems may operate to repress or exclude alternative information (Manning, 2021). Chapman and Schott (2020) highlight that knowledge perceived as objective, empirical and scientific is frequently accorded more weight than knowledge regarded as based on human experience, tradition or indigenous knowledge systems, for example. As Chapman and Schott (2020) so eloquently put it, such knowledge is often dismissed or given less weight in western academic institutions. This can lead to the exclusion or marginalisation of academics and researchers from non-western or non-dominant backgrounds, as well as the preservation of a uniform and generally limited understanding of what constitutes valid knowledge.

A solution to this problem was suggested by Sikimić (2023) who posits that epistemic justice demands the adoption of a more diverse and inclusive approach to knowledge development and distribution. This solution recognises and honours the unique contributions of a diverse range of ethnicities and cultures (Althaus, 2020; Wiebe et al., 2023). We identify more with Sikimić (2023) and maintain that a solution is to develop more democratic and participatory knowledge systems by removing established hierarchies and vested interests inside academia and other sources of expert information. According to Althaus (2020), epistemic justice requires us to address the ethical consequences of the methods we use to generate and transmit knowledge about the world. The notion that we are responsible for ensuring that our knowledge practices are founded on principles of justice and fairness and that the methods we use to produce and transmit information have significant ethical and political implications is central to this viewpoint. This can include taking steps such as becoming conscious of the potential biases and limitations of our own perspectives and experiences, actively seeking out different forms of knowledge, and trying to build more inclusive and egalitarian places for knowledge production and dissemination. Most importantly, we view the pursuit of epistemic justice as fostering a more just and equitable society by ensuring that information is obtained and communicated in ways that consider the experiences and perspectives of all community members.

### **Perspectives of Epistemic Justice in the Context of Online Learning**

In recent years, according to Dhawan (2020), there has been a dramatic rise in the popularity of online learning, which is most certainly a direct result of Covid-19. Flexibility, affordability and accessibility of online education are just three of the numerous advantages of online programmes. However, Spiegel (2022) regards epistemic injustice as one of the many obstacles and constraints of online learning. “Epistemic injustice” according to Giusti and Piras (2020) and Nihei (2022) refers to the unequal distribution of information that might result from prejudices, societal inequities and power inequalities. In the context of online learning, epistemic justice would ensure that all students have an equitable opportunity to gain information. This study aims to help readers comprehend epistemic fairness in the context of online learning. Most importantly, embracing the idea that the perspectives of epistemic justice in the context of online learning involves creating an inclusive, diverse and equitable educational environment that values all forms of knowledge and actively works to address historical and systemic inequalities. By doing so, online learning can become a powerful tool for promoting social justice and empowering students from all walks of life.

The following sections comprehensively explore epistemic justice’s significance in online learning. Subsequently, we delve into the challenges and constraints accompanying the pursuit of epistemic justice within online learning environments. This discussion explores potential remedies to mitigate these challenges and promote epistemic justice in online learning. Ultimately, we close our discussion by summarising the pivotal role that epistemic justice plays in the realm of online education.

### **Overview of epistemic justice**

Khoo et al. (2020) found epistemic justice to be useful to a decoloniality that reorients the curriculum: we thus refer to it as the equitable treatment and recognition of diverse forms of knowledge, perspectives and voices within digital educational environments. We also agree with Sikimić (2023) when acknowledging that epistemic justice encompasses the principles of fairness, inclusivity and respect for the epistemic contributions of all participants in the online learning process.

When we consider education in the context of online learning, epistemic justice becomes more important because it can affect both the quality of education and the access it provides to a wide variety of students. This is because epistemic fairness can affect the quality of education and the access it provides. Barrot et al. (2021) suggest that it may be difficult for some students from less fortunate families to fully participate in online programmes for reasons such as inadequate access to technology or socioeconomic inequities. Students with impairments may have a more difficult time engaging in an online class if the class content is not developed with their needs in mind. Hence, perspectives that adhere to epistemic justice must ensure equal access to and participation in online education.

### **Challenges and limitations of epistemic justice in online learning**

While there may be certain advantages to acquiring knowledge through the use of the internet, Khoo et al., (2020) assert that several disadvantages related to epistemic justice also need to be considered. The disadvantages include limited time and technological issues such as poor audio and video quality during live conferences, which continue to promote the digital divide. The “digital divide,” refers to the unequal distribution of technology (Spanakis et al., (2021) and access to the internet is one of the most urgent problems we face in the modern era. Similarly, Brown (2020) views the digital divide as an economic and social inequality regarding access

to, use, or impact of information and communication technologies. Students from low-income households may have difficulty participating in online classes since they may not have access to the appropriate technology. It is possible that this will widen the knowledge gap between people who have access to current tools and those who do not. Ndlovu (2022) warns that one obstacle that must be overcome to establish epistemic fairness in online education is the dearth of diversity in course materials. Sometimes the material of online courses is developed by a relatively small group of persons who may not adequately represent the diversity of student experiences and viewpoints. This can lead to people having a limited perspective of the world and assists in promoting dominant tales while simultaneously suppressing marginalised people. In a class on South African history, for example, the teacher might only present the viewpoints of white, male authors, omitting the contributions of authors of colour, women and members of other underrepresented groups.

Verhoef and Coetser (2021) mention the challenge of the legitimacy of online education, citing the possibility of dishonesty or plagiarism. The absence of the structured and controlled environment typically found in traditional settings may mean that online classrooms are more susceptible to academic dishonesty than face-to-face lectures. This vulnerability stems from the absence of a physical teacher. In contexts involving online learning, the probability of students encountering such risks is significantly heightened. Students who engage in deceitful academic practices gain an unfair advantage over their honest peers, exacerbating the disparity of knowledge.

### **The importance of epistemic justice and potential solutions to address the challenges of epistemic justice**

Auerback (2021) recommends building trustworthy character traits, often virtues, that neutralise prejudice to prevent epistemic injustice. When we evaluate someone's credibility, we ought to make it a goal to avoid being biased in our assessment of them. Some of the most compelling arguments for epistemic justice's significance in the realm of online education are as follows:

- *Addressing structural inequalities:* Potential social inequities caused by online learning include differences in socioeconomic position and physical location (Reus-Smit & Zarakol, 2023). Online learning platforms can reduce educational disparities by ensuring all students have access to high-quality learning materials and activities.
- *Recognising diverse forms of knowledge:* This paradigm of epistemic justice can be used by online learning providers to make their platforms more welcoming to students from all walks of life, fostering an atmosphere where everyone's ideas and insights are taken seriously (Reus-Smit & Zarakol, 2023).
- *Encouraging critical thinking:* Students are urged to question and evaluate the information they are given as part of an epistemic justice curriculum (Mathis et al., 2023). This is paramount because students can receive biased or erroneous material in an online learning environment. Students can become more discerning and well-informed consumers of knowledge through online learning tools that encourage critical thinking.
- *Fostering collaboration and community:* Despite the inherent isolation of studying online, epistemic justice places a premium on the value of group work and discussion (Patel & Kester, 2023). Supportive and collaborative learning environments can be fostered via online learning platforms that emphasise peer-to-peer learning and allow students to connect and engage with one another.
- *Supporting education as a way of life:* Knowledge is shared and created via the efforts of many people, which is what we mean by "epistemological fairness". Using this structure, online education can motivate students to keep learning and growing even after graduating from a programme.

Epistemic justice is a powerful instrument that may be used in the digital classroom to achieve equity and fairness. Online learning platforms can provide an inclusive and equitable environment for students of diverse educational backgrounds, as they can prioritise and support various pedagogical approaches to knowledge acquisition, critical thinking, community development and lifelong learning.

### **Perspectives of Epistemic Justice in the Context of Online Learning**

Epistemic justice in the context of online learning refers to ensuring fairness and equity in the distribution of knowledge, information, and educational opportunities in digital environments (Ndzinisa & Dlamini, 2021). It addresses the question of who has access to knowledge and whose voices and perspectives are valued and acknowledged within online learning spaces. The perspectives that need to be considered in implementing epistemic justice in online learning are highlighted in Figure 1:

**Figure 1: Perspectives of epistemic justice in online learning**

With regard to inclusivity and diversity, Coman et al. (2020) affirm that online courses should be designed to accommodate students with different abilities, linguistic backgrounds and cultural perspectives. Inclusivity can involve providing multiple resources, formats and engagement opportunities to cater to various learning styles and needs. Ensuring that online learning materials and platforms are accessible to all is a fundamental aspect of epistemic justice. This includes making content available in various formats (text, audio, video), providing alt text for images, and using technology that is compatible with screen readers and other assistive tools. Tate and Warschauer (2022) established that addressing issues related to physical access, such as reliable internet connections and accessible devices, is also essential to promote equity in online learning.

Epistemic justice concerns how our understanding of knowledge contributes to or exacerbates unequal access to information. Epistemic justice focuses on how dominant epistemologies might invalidate or disregard the expertise of underrepresented communities (Mathis et al., 2023). By giving some epistemic norms more weight than others, dominant epistemologies can obscure or even eradicate knowledge held by those on the margins of society. In addition, Epistemic justice encourages including diverse perspectives in the curriculum and course materials. Representation and curriculum mean not only incorporating a variety of voices but also critically examining and challenging dominant narratives and biases. It is important to consider whose knowledge is being prioritised in the curriculum and to include underrepresented voices and perspectives. This can help counteract the reproduction of inequalities present in traditional educational settings.

Al Rawashdeh et al. (2021) posit that online learning should allow all students to participate actively in discussions and activities. Epistemic justice involves giving space for marginalised voices to be heard and valued. Teachers can implement inclusive discussion guidelines, use anonymous participation options and encourage peer feedback to create a safe and supportive environment for diverse perspectives.

Epistemic justice challenges traditional assessment methods that may disadvantage certain groups of students. It promotes alternative and equitable assessment approaches that recognise different forms of knowledge and skills. The Centre for Human Rights University of Pretoria (2022) states that epistemic justice includes safeguarding personal information and protecting students' digital identities. Teachers should be mindful of potential biases in grading and evaluation and consider implementing strategies to mitigate them. Online learning platforms should prioritise data privacy and security, particularly in cases where vulnerable populations are involved.

Turning to resource allocation, Mohd-Basar et al. (2021) theorise that ensuring all students have access to the necessary resources for online learning is crucial. Giving all students access may involve providing subsidies for internet access, supplying laptops or devices and offering technical support.

#### **Critiquing Epistemic Justice through Bernstein's Framing and Regulation**

Concern in academia about the lack of epistemic justice has risen in recent years. In this view, some types of knowledge are more highly valued and regarded than others, leading to a disparity in the access to and use of information and authority. The consequences of this lack of epistemic justice for underrepresented groups are significant since they contribute to maintaining existing socioeconomic inequities and strengthening existing

power systems (Patel & Kester, 2023). This section provides an analysis of Bernstein's conceptualisation and regulation of the concept of epistemic fairness and offers some criticisms.

When examining issues of epistemic justice, Bernstein's theory of framing and regulation provides a helpful foundation. Bernstein proposed that knowledge can be thought of on two levels: the level of the frame and the level of the rules. The term "framing" is used to describe how much authority each party in a pedagogical exchange has over the content, delivery and assessment of lessons. Knowledge is said to be "framed" when it is organised in a certain way, whereas "regulated" information refers to how it is created and shared (Bernstein, 1975). Framing establishes the limits of what can be known and what cannot. The framing process entails applying signs and categories to the organisation of information (Bernstein, 1975). For instance, how we define gender might profoundly affect our internal perception of it. Those who identify as neither "male" or "female" can feel left out of the conversation and their experiences dismissed if gender is portrayed as a dichotomous term.

Knowledge creation and dissemination are regulated by a set of norms and procedures (Bernstein, 1975). Everything from how information is generated to the institutions responsible for its verification and the guidelines for its dissemination are part of this framework. Knowing who has the power to create and verify knowledge and who has access to that knowledge is crucial, which is why regulation is so crucial. Certain marginalised groups may be left out of the conversation if, for instance, academic research is governed so that only individuals with a specific level of education and access to finance can develop and authenticate knowledge.

### **Reflections on Rethinking Online Learning through the Epistemic Justice Lens**

Online learning has rapidly expanded worldwide since the COVID-19 pandemic. While online learning opens doors, we question whether it adequately serves all students, particularly those from underrepresented communities. As a theoretical framework, epistemic justice sheds light on the role that inequality of power plays in the creation, distribution and accessibility of educational resources. If we reevaluate online learning through the perspective of epistemic justice, we can better understand how it might be used to advance social justice and widen participation in the pursuit of knowledge.

### **Epistemic justice and online learning**

Rethinking online learning through an epistemic justice lens is a profound and essential undertaking in the context of education. Epistemic justice as viewed by Schmidt (2019) is a framework that focuses on fairness and equity in distributing knowledge, respecting diverse ways of knowing, and acknowledging the importance of different voices and perspectives. When applied to online learning, epistemic justice leads to reevaluating traditional educational practices and developing more inclusive and equitable approaches. Ignoring or discounting the expertise of excluded groups, promoting only certain forms of knowledge as legitimate, and privileging some voices and viewpoints over others are all examples of epistemic injustice, that can occur in educational contexts (Okoroji et al., 2023). Moonasamy and Naidoo (2022) suggest several ways in which online education can exacerbate epistemic inequality. For instance, leaving out students with impairments if online platforms do not suit their needs are using automated grading and feedback systems that may disproportionately affect students learning English as a second language or with a non-traditional educational background. By emphasising the value of various forms of knowledge and experience in the classroom, Nieminen and Lahdenperä (2021) affirm that epistemic justice provides a theoretical framework for resolving these problems. As educators, we must keep in mind the following ideas to advance epistemic justice in online teaching:

- **Acknowledgement of diversity:** Epistemic justice, as suggested by Byskov (2021) requires that all types of knowledge, especially those derived from marginalised groups' experiences, are recognised as genuine and useful. Educators should try to establish an inclusive learning environment that acknowledges and honours the diversity of their students' viewpoints and experiences.
- **Power-sharing:** Symonds (2021) states that the concept of power-sharing acknowledges knowledge due to intricate social interactions and power structures. Similarly, Segbenya et al. (2022) elucidate that power can manifest in various forms within the realm of online learning, including its influence on platform design and methods of delivering feedback. Our stance aligns with these insights, emphasising the need for educators to actively engage in power-sharing by allowing students to generate and disseminate information.
- **Accessibility:** Khoo et al. (2020) assert that epistemic justice ensures that every student, regardless of background, abilities, or available resources, enjoys equal access to information. We maintain that educators should strive to design inclusive online learning platforms for students with disabilities and incorporate adjustments to accommodate those facing learning difficulties.
- **Critical engagement:** Khoo et al. (2020) highlight that epistemic justice requires students to interact critically with knowledge and scrutinise the power dynamics governing its creation and dissemination. In light of

this, we recognise the importance of educators creating opportunities for students to critically reflect on the knowledge they are acquiring and the mechanisms through which it is generated and shared.

### Promoting Epistemic Justice through online learning platforms

In order to foster epistemic justice within the online learning environment, educators can take steps to ensure that delivery platforms are both inclusive and accessible. Alsheri et al. (2023) note that the development of these platforms should be designed to cater for the diverse needs of all students. Achieving true accessibility entails collaboration between educators, information technology specialists and accessibility experts. This collaborative effort may involve providing alternative course materials, such as audio or video recordings, real-time captioning and sign language interpretation, to ensure the platform is accessible to every student.

To achieve this goal, it is imperative that courses and educational materials are crafted with a broader audience in mind, actively seeking and incorporating new modes of thinking and diverse cultural perspectives into the learning process. Transforming online education into a vehicle for promoting equality and self-determination, as posited by Coman (2020), stands to benefit all students.

### Conclusion

In this paper, we highlighted the growing popularity of online learning, which has been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. While online learning offers various benefits, it also faces significant challenges, particularly regarding epistemic diversity and cultural relevance. The paper has argued that online education lacks cultural responsiveness, hybridity and knowledge access, which can perpetuate existing power dynamics and inequalities. It has been suggested that reevaluating online learning from the perspective of epistemic justice is essential to address these issues. The paper has connected Bernstein's pedagogic device to epistemic justice, which addresses knowledge, power, biases and social and political influences on knowledge production and distribution. Epistemic justice's central focus is ensuring that knowledge is distributed fairly and equitably, especially for marginalised groups whose perspectives and experiences are frequently ignored. The article concludes that online learning platforms can reduce educational disparities by ensuring all students have access to high-quality learning materials and activities, making these platforms more welcoming to students from all walks of life, and encouraging critical thinking. The paper suggests potential remedies to mitigate these challenges and promote epistemic justice in online learning.

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