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Promoting social justice in higher education with open educational resources

The use of open educational resources could promote social justice in the South African higher education sector – especially in terms of the curriculum transformation and decolonial agenda, which highlights a range of systemic injustices related to accessibility and inclusivity.

This is according to University of Cape Town (UCT) researchers Dr Glenda Cox, Bianca Masuku and Michelle Willmers of the Digital Open Textbooks for Development (DOT4D) initiative who recently had their chapter on 'Open Textbooks, Intuitive Pedagogy, and Social Justice' published in the 'Using Open Educational Resources to Promote Social Justice' edited volume published by the Association of College and Research Libraries.

The chapter examines the role of open textbooks (OT) in promoting social justice and explores five UCT OT authors' experiences in the classroom and how this affects their approaches to teaching and their OT development processes.

The OT authors identified a series of social injustices in their classrooms, including lack of access to relevant, affordable teaching and learning materials; disparity in educational background, resulting in a lack of digital literacy and a skills gap between secondary and tertiary education; scheduling of late classes excluding students who have to travel far distances; second- or third-language English speakers receiving instruction in English; social dynamics, self-confidence or lack of confidence (personality traits); social stress such as anxiety and depression; and cultural dynamics perpetuating white, patriarchal, heteronormative ideals and the exclusion of historically marginalised voices.

Many of these OT authors expressed a sense of powerlessness in terms of being able to effectively respond to the injustices and transformation imperatives they witnessed in their classrooms. However, using this awareness and their intuitive approaches to teaching, they found that developing their OTs provided a means through which they felt they could try to address social injustice in the classroom. In this regard OTs serve as a platform or mechanism through which to incorporate multiple voices and politically challenge the status quo, shift power dynamics and address issues of relevance, and counter existing profit-driven publishing models.

In the context of this study, OT development extends the intuitive pedagogical approach toward achieving social justice in the classroom, moving beyond affirmation toward transformation in the economic sense, as the open textbook is available free of charge and is easily accessible, enabling economic redistribution.

The societal maldistribution, misrecognition and misrepresentation implicit in the traditional use of textbooks and other teaching and learning materials in South African higher education requires deeper intervention. However, the OT is one achievable, recommended step toward redress. The OT is especially powerful, in that it provides the affordance for students to participate in their own academic journeys. The OT development process also allows the educator to carefully consider who the authoring entity is and what their own role is in the authoring process. It allows for the inclusion of student voice, thereby empowering students.

Looking ahead toward a transformative response to social injustice, the valiant efforts of some OT creators in some classrooms need to extend across the institution and across institutions. Cox, Masuku and Wilmers thus argue that institutional support in the form of open textbook awards, grants, recognition of open education work in promotion criteria, and the empowerment of academics through intellectual property ownership are crucial for transformation of the sector.

[Access the chapter online.](#)

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