

## Education Review

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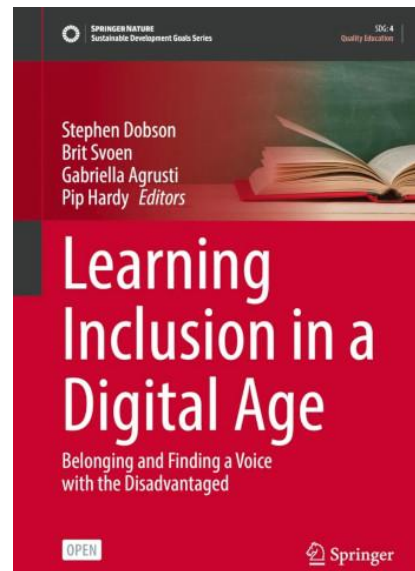
**Dobson, S., Svoen, B., Agrusti, G., & Hardy, P. (2024). *Learning inclusion in a digital age: Belonging and finding a voice with the disadvantaged*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-7196-1>**

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*Learning Inclusion in a Digital Age*, edited by Stephen Dobson, Brit Svoen, Gabriella Agrusti, and Pip Hardy, represents a timely intervention in ongoing debates about inclusive education, digital technology, and the struggle for social justice in the 21st century. Published within Springer's *Sustainable Development Goals Series*, the book explicitly aligns itself with SDG 4—ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all—while also gesturing toward the interconnectedness of education with well-being (SDG 3) and sustainable communities (SDG 11). More than a rhetorical nod to international agendas, the book's central claim is that “inclusion itself must be learned,” not merely enacted as policy compliance, and that this learning emerges through practices of storytelling, belonging, and the active claiming of voice in digital spaces.



Structurally, *Learning Inclusion in a Digital Age* is divided into three interconnected parts that weave together conceptual reflections, empirical case studies, and reflective dialogues, offering a coherent progression of arguments that build toward the book's central claim: that inclusion is not merely a policy mandate but a process of learning through belonging, storytelling, and participatory engagement in digital environments. Across 13 chapters, the editors and contributors frame, illustrate, and interrogate what it means to “learn inclusion” in practice, particularly for marginalized groups such as migrants, refugees, and vulnerable adults.

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Part I lays the conceptual foundation by aligning the book's vision with the Sustainable Development Goals and situating digital inclusion within broader debates about migration, vulnerability, and education. Bloomfield's foreword introduces the idea of the *limenosphere* as a transitional space between exclusion and belonging (p. 12), while the editors recast marginalized learners not as "*digital bystanders*" but as potential "*digital upstanders*" who can claim agency in digital spaces (p. xix). This conceptual scaffolding is innovative, but the reliance on metaphorical language occasionally overshadows empirical grounding, leaving the reader looking forward to the lived experiences presented in the following sections.

Part II forms the empirical core of the book, presenting rich accounts of Erasmus+ projects such as LIBE, ReGap, and Advenus. Here, digital storytelling and participatory design are deployed as methods for enabling disadvantaged learners to narrate their own experiences and strengthen belonging. The ReGap project, for example, engaged over 400 participants in co-designed storytelling platforms that aimed to strengthen social inclusion and a sense of belonging. Hardy and Dobson describe "storytelling circles" in which participants not only acquired digital skills but also cultivated identity and agency. These chapters are compelling in their immediacy and authenticity, illustrating the editors' claim that the experiences and personal stories of vulnerable adult minorities have formed the foundation and premises of the chapters. Yet this reliance on project-based narratives introduces certain limitations: outcomes often remain highly localized, context-specific, and difficult to extrapolate to wider global frameworks of inclusion. Furthermore, while the pedagogical promise of digital storytelling is evident, the lack of longitudinal evaluation—such as its impact on employment, wellbeing, or civic participation—reduces the persuasiveness of these interventions for policymakers.

Part III turns toward reflective dialogue and critical synthesis, providing a more explicitly philosophical and pedagogical orientation. The editors invite external voices such as Arjen Wals to probe the limits of their framework, raising questions about whether more critical approaches to digital inclusion are needed (p. 61). The afterword reinforces this reflexivity, stressing that inclusion depends on processes of "conscientization," through which learners and educators alike critically interrogate social myths and entrenched traditions (p. 172). These chapters exemplify the book's Freirean underpinnings, positioning digital storytelling not only as an educational method but also as a moral and political act. Still, while these reflective dialogues acknowledge risks such as tokenism, exclusion, and technocentrism, they often stop short of articulating concrete strategies for systemic transformation, leaving some critiques unresolved.

Taken together, the 12 chapters across the three parts provide a coherent thematic arc: from conceptual reframing, through empirical illustration, to reflective synthesis. Recurring motifs—voice, belonging, liminality, and agency—lend coherence to the diverse contributions and underscore the book's commitment to centering the lived realities of marginalized learners. Yet the structure also reveals limitations. The heavy concentration on European Erasmus+ projects narrows the global applicability of its insights, while the reflective sections, though thoughtful, sometimes underplay the structural asymmetries of digital capitalism and education policy that shape inclusion. Thus, while the book's organization is methodologically

and thematically strong, it ultimately offers a vision of inclusion that is inspiring and provocative but also partial and context-dependent.

One of the book's most provocative arguments is its rejection of deficit discourses. The editors challenge the common perception of marginalized learners as passive outsiders—"digital bystanders"—and instead argue for their potential transformation into "digital upstanders". This reframing is powerful, resonating with Slee's (2019) insistence that inclusion cannot be reduced to physical presence in institutions but must be measured through the experience of belonging. Yet, while the metaphor of "upstanders" signals agency, the book sometimes risks overstating the capacity of digital environments to neutralize entrenched social hierarchies. As Selwyn (2019) reminds us, technology is not an apolitical force but a site where existing inequalities are often reproduced. The book acknowledges these contradictions but tends to emphasize pedagogical possibilities over structural constraints.

Methodologically, the use of digital storytelling as a pedagogical strategy stands at the heart of the volume. Hardy and Dobson describe "storytelling circles" where individuals in vulnerable situations came together in small groups to listen to each other's stories and craft their own. These practices, they argue, allowed participants to build not only digital communication skills but also identity and agency. The editors stress, however, that digital storytelling is not "a magic bullet able to provide all who adopt it with the opportunity to become included and empowered" (p. xxvii). This admission is important, for it prevents the methodology from being romanticized. Still, a more critical engagement with the risks of digital storytelling—such as issues of privacy, representation, and the commodification of personal narratives—would have enriched the analysis.

Thematically, the book foregrounds the concept of liminality in processes of inclusion. Bloomfield's foreword highlights the limenosphere as a *zone of transition* in which marginalized individuals navigate ambiguous positions between exclusion and belonging. This metaphor effectively captures the psychosocial struggles of displaced and disadvantaged learners. However, the book sometimes allows metaphorical language to overshadow empirical depth. For instance, while it highlights the exclusion of migrants and refugees through labels such as "NEETs" ("not in education, employment or training"), which reduce young people to "economic crisis" (p. x), the narrative analysis does not consistently give extended space to the learners' own unmediated voices. In a work that champions storytelling, more direct quotations from participants could have demonstrated inclusion in practice rather than merely describing it.

A notable strength of the book lies in its insistence that inclusion is not reducible to access. As the editors sharply note, "just because the horse is taken to the water, it does not mean it will drink" (p. xix). Providing hardware or internet access is insufficient if learners do not experience belonging, recognition, and meaning in digital environments. This echoes UNESCO's (2018) argument that digital inclusion must go beyond technical access to encompass usability, cultural relevance, and empowerment. The book thus contributes to the growing literature that critiques the "myth of access" in digital education and insists on shifting metrics from enrollment and device distribution to lived experiences of inclusion.

Yet the book's reliance on European Erasmus+ projects also reveals its Eurocentric bias. While framed within global SDG discourse, the empirical material is drawn almost exclusively from European contexts—Norway, Italy, Portugal, and the UK. The editors acknowledge that digital divides remain profound, but the absence of Global South perspectives is striking. Learners in regions where infrastructure is weak, linguistic diversity is high, and gender-based exclusion is systemic might experience inclusion very differently. By focusing narrowly on Europe, the book risks universalizing European models of digital pedagogy. This limitation does not diminish the value of its insights but does restrict its global applicability.

Critically, the volume also skirts a deeper confrontation with the political economy of digital platforms. While acknowledging that access and inclusion are unequally distributed, the chapters rarely interrogate how platform monopolies, algorithmic governance, or surveillance capitalism shape digital learning environments. As Selwyn (2020) and Williamson (2021) have argued, digital education is inseparable from the infrastructures of power that sustain it. By emphasizing participatory design and storytelling, the book foregrounds agency but tends to underplay structural asymmetries that constrain that agency. A more thorough political-economic critique would have elevated the book's contribution beyond pedagogy to systemic analysis.

The reflective tone of the editors is nonetheless commendable. They invite readers to consider inclusion as a collective moral responsibility rather than a checklist of interventions. In the afterword, the editors stress that inclusion requires a process of “conscientization” through which both learners and educators’ question “social myths and forms of established traditions” (p. 9). This Freirean orientation underscores the book's critical pedagogy roots. Edwards (2023) has similarly emphasized that education for marginalized learners must build positive relational contexts that challenge systemic exclusions. The resonance between the book's practical storytelling projects and these broader theoretical currents affirms its scholarly relevance.

In evaluating its contribution, one can say that the book advances three critical insights. First, it redefines inclusion as an ongoing practice of learning rather than a static policy goal. Second, it highlights the pedagogical significance of digital storytelling for building identity, belonging, and agency. Third, it situates inclusion within the interdisciplinary frame of the SDGs, linking education with health, wellbeing, and sustainability. However, three limitations temper these achievements: the Eurocentric scope of case studies, which undermines global relevance; the absence of systematic evaluation, as projects lack longitudinal evidence of impact; and the insufficient engagement with the political economy of digital infrastructures, which leaves structural barriers underexamined.

Despite these weaknesses, the book is valuable precisely because it unsettles complacency. It resists equating inclusion with access and insists on recognizing the lived realities and voices of marginalized learners. For researchers, it suggests directions such as longitudinal studies of storytelling outcomes, comparative analyses across contexts, and critical engagements with platform governance. For policymakers, it offers a reminder that inclusion cannot be legislated but must be

cultivated. For educators, it reaffirms that the digital age requires not only technical skills but also relational, ethical, and cultural competencies. Ultimately, *Learning Inclusion in a Digital Age* is a significant, if imperfect, contribution. Its greatest value lies in insisting that inclusion be learned, practiced, and continually reimagined. In a world where digital technologies both open and foreclose possibilities, this reminder is timely and urgent.

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**Stephen Dobson** is Professor II at the Centre for Life Long Learning, Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences, Norway. He is fluent in Scandinavian languages and has co-led several EU projects. Currently he co-leads the Erasmus+ project (2024-2026) Learn2Learn MicroCred - with participants from Norway, Italy, Ireland and CQUniversity. He holds two PhDs, one in cultural studies and fefugees (Nottingham Trent University, 2000) and another in assessment and education (Institute of Education, University College London, 2008). A Magistergrad in sociology (University of Oslo, 1990) complements his later studies.



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