Improving Digital Practices for Literacy, Learning, and Justice

More Than Just Tools

Educators, parents and families, administrators, policymakers, and even students cannot look to individual tools to improve digital literacy practices. The common refrain "there's an app for that" simply doesn't cut it when we are talking about meaningful learning in today's digital age. In fact, efforts to invest heavily in single tools—from devices such as iPads to software that help prepare students for test taking—ultimately try to bridge generations-long chasms in educational equity with tools that are not equipped for the task.

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Contexts of Learning in a Digital Age

Rather than preparing classrooms to plug in, download, or sync new tools, classrooms must facilitate authentic learning goals for students; these goals will lead to instructional practices that *may* find support through digital resources.

For example, an English classroom may explore social justice movements by looking at the rhetorical structure of hashtags in social networks, or a social science classroom may use video editing software to support student-created documentaries tied to the history of the school's community. In both cases, the digital tools are secondary to the teacher's literacy and learning goals.

Powerful literacy instruction should prepare students today to produce, communicate, interpret, and socialize with peers, adults, and the broader world they will enter when they graduate. Such interactions require a mastery of written and spoken language and a familiarity with literary devices and rhetorical structures, skills historically grounded in literacy instruction.

In their professional and personal lives, many people today move fluidly across digital and nondigital resources: texts and tweets may be used to coordinate plans, whereas face-to-face meetings can yield multimodal products like Instagram posts and Facebook messages. Schedules are coordinated digitally, and groups of employees meet in person to produce digital texts for presentation to audiences in multiple formats.

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The point to grasp is that digital and nondigital contexts for learning are not discrete, and modern offices are still peppered with print-based texts. So, too, our classrooms must move fluidly between the digital and analog worlds that we simultaneously inhabit. Doing otherwise leads to the problem of becoming entrenched in practices that are outdated and out of sync (one need only look at the dust-gathering smartboards that litter many schools today as an example).

Teachers might consider how effective and persuasive arguments are supported via online platforms like Twitter. Searching for topics through keywords and hashtags means that multiple authors' perspectives offer a polyphony of new ideas while inviting students to contribute to an ongoing and meaningful dialogue.

At the same time, as a *social* network that exists in the physical world, students can interact face to face with classmates, interview friends and family members, and engage in their own reflective processes. Intentionally building time for these online and offline literacy practices allows students to see themselves as agents of change *across* settings.

Designing Digital Contexts for the Future

Rather than invest resources, energy, and professional development on individual tools, responsive digital instruction today must focus on the contexts of literacies that are used. To this extent, classroom technology uses should more clearly mirror the kinds of work environments that we expect students to eventually encounter. This means moving away from rote instructional practices that are anchored in individual apps and devices toward considering how today's professionals seamlessly produce, respond to, and coordinate work and personal activities across myriad devices, tools, and topics.

Technology supports the imaginative literacy possibilities of young people. Outside of schools, youth are often engaged in rich learning and production-oriented activities that employ digital resources to make, play, design, hack, and innovate. Moreover, the uptake of reading novels on digital devices or consuming fiction through audiobooks is on the rise. Building ELA classrooms around digital contexts does not override the purpose or value of literature in the lives of young people.

Equity and Digital Contexts for Literacy Instruction

Educational inequity has persisted for generations and is tied to long-standing historical marginalization of youth based on race, class, and gender. Though technology can create *some* opportunities for different kinds of learning and engagement, it cannot act as a lasting salve for dressing the hurts of systemic oppression. To this extent, it is possible for schools' emphasis on technology to widen the achievement gap that harms marginalized communities.

An abundance of technical advances easing and shaping the contexts of work for some but not for others creates more inequality in schools instead of leveling the education playing field. The inequities of schooling are exacerbated when literacy instruction focuses on tools that may not be fully accessible in all schools. An innovation in one school community—a new digital learning platform, a set of tablet devices for a classroom—highlights how technological opportunities are neither equally distributed across schools nor viable solutions to deeply rooted educational problems.

The education community's assumption that digital tools can fix persistent learning outcomes is neither new nor something that has yielded convincing results. Instead of continually trying to disrupt inequality through expensive devices, investing in teacher knowledge of the contexts of literacy learning makes more sense. This approach *can* lead to improving schooling because students are still able to meaningfully participate in learning practices that mirror and prepare them for the fluid literacy tasks the broader world demands of them.

For example, recent attempts at using mobile devices in ELA classrooms rather than banning them allowed students who were previously seen as quiet to emerge as literacy leaders and experts within the classroom community. Typing text on a screen, illuminating topics for discussion through creative photography, and "speaking" without having to utter a word through digital resources allowed technology to augment the existing relationships that are central within classrooms.

Meaningful application of digital technologies is not an attempt to mask the educational inequality that continues to persist in schools. Instead, the forms of production and amplification that are possible when students learn fluidly in new

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digital contexts can help spotlight areas of necessary advocacy in public schooling.

For example, rules that restrict student use of personal media devices during lunches and passing periods reinforce power structures that mimic cell phone policies primarily found in working-class jobs. Middle-class employers, by contrast, often turn a blind eye to employees using their phones during work, and adults in higher paying jobs expect to be able to respond to email and text messages as needed.

Disciplinary policies around devices often guide students toward specific kinds of professional outcomes that are invisible to both students and schools alike. When school administrators take away students' phones or tell them to put them away during class time, they are teaching implicit lessons about the kind of work environments these students are expected to enter. In this light, digital literacies are a matter of social justice.

Similarly, technology—when looking at the possible texts and communities that students may safely interact with—radically broadens the diversity of language uses that students encounter and write in. From multimodal communicative practices that use emoji and reference memes to parsing the citation formats of crowdsourced wikis, digital contexts of learning provide rich, authentic interactions for learning and communication.

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Recognizing Limitations and Improving Classroom Practices

In considering the opportunities for designing equitable digital learning contexts, it is important to recognize the limits of what digital resources can achieve. Here are some of the things that technology cannot do:

- Replace the fundamental core of a schooling experience: the relationships fostered and sustained between teachers and students
- Make school more interesting, engaging, or exciting for students simply by having wireless access or digital screens delivering curriculum
- Act as a cure-all for legacies of inequity that cleave the educational, vocational, and socioeconomic possibilities for students within the United States and across the globe

Literacy classrooms alone cannot be the only spaces that are reimagining authentic, equity-driven instruction and support in schools. However, the way technology is understood in schools can help refocus professional practice around overdue commitments to justice and learning in today's digital age.

By acknowledging these real limitations to what digital resources can do, digital resources can be used more meaningfully for just and authentic forms of literacy instruction today. By weaving digital resources into a caring vision of literacy learning, educators can better prepare youth for civic, academic, and vocational pathways beyond schools.

MOVING FORWARD

- Build on the skills, passions, and interests that drive student learning outside of school.
- Connect student writing and production to authentic audiences that can offer useful feedback and assessment.
- Center youth expertise and interests within classrooms.
- Be prepared for nondigital instruction when digital resources—inevitably—fail at crucial moments.

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