

DEVELOPING CRITICAL CONSUMERS AND CREATORS: MERGING CRITICAL LITERACY WITH DIGITAL TOOLS

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Abstract

Moving students beyond functional literacy is needed now more than ever because of the constant influx of digital information. By merging critical literacy practices with students' digital experiences, we can support students in becoming critical consumers and creators of information. Students' experiences in the digital world can be an opportunity for educators to create a space for meaningful learning that develops democratic practices in the classroom. The article will explore the role of literacy in the digital age, while also offering practical examples for educators.

Keywords: critical literacy, 21st century learning, digital citizens, digital tools

In classrooms today, students are often looked upon as sponges as they passively absorb the knowledge teachers offer them. However, education in a democratic society demands that future citizens go through the academic pipeline as hammers rather than sponges. Like hammers, students should be able to break down information into its component parts for analytic purposes. Through the use of critical literacy, teachers should encourage the leaders of tomorrow to construct their own meaning and become critical consumers of digital information. This article will explore the digital experiences of today's 21st Century student, engage in a discussion of critical literacy's conceptual underpinnings, and connect critical literacy to the digital world through practical supports for the classroom.

Students in the Digital Age

The Bureau of Statistics (2014) reports that time spent during a student's day on digital devices is about 3.3 hours, while reading only counts for approximately .1 hours. In addition, students are accustomed to a world where they are constantly connected, sharing and communicating their thoughts with a simple click of a button. In 2015, 92% of young people reported accessing the Internet daily, and 71% of young people reported having multiple social media sites on which to share or post (Lenhart, 2015). Whether through *Instagram*, *Snapchat*, or *Twitter*, students are constantly revealing their lives through a social world they have created.

Many students also feel that posting on social media and connecting with others online helps shape their identity and development of self (Barker, 2009; Selwyn & Stirling, 2016). The impulses associated with "sharing" or "liking" or "commenting" are a part of our students' lived experiences. Because students are growing up in a digital world fixated on sharing, teachers should take advantage of this and allow students to share their classroom products. Through digital interactions with content, peers, and global perspectives, students can establish a sense of presence, identity, and ownership (Hall & Piazza, 2010; Kellner & Share, 2009). Through digital tools, students can interact with not only their entire class; but also, with students from around the world.

Despite student engagement with the digital world, 21st century students have classroom experiences that strongly contrast with the digital interactions they experience in their *real* world. Due to high-stakes testing environments, academic curricula have been narrowed to focus on test preparation (Supovitz, 2009). In addition, literacy development has become a

mandated school success initiative rather than a journey of learning (Campano, Ghiso, & Sánchez, 2013). The testing environment, which approaches learning as a mechanistic process for basic comprehension, has had a negative impact on literacy practices and how students view themselves as literate individuals (Dutro & Selland, 2012; Wolters, Denton, York, & Francis, 2014). Rather than supporting student ownership and engagement, students are often drowning in an environment of inauthentic assessments.

Foundations of Critical Literacy

Critical literacy can bridge the digital world and the world of the classroom by encouraging students to develop a sense of ownership and be actively involved in their education. Based upon fifteen years of work with teachers, Lewison, Leland, and Harste (2015) define critical literacy:

Critical literacy practices encourage students to use language to question the everyday world, to interrogate the relationship between language and power, to analyze popular culture and media, to understand how power relationships are socially constructed, and to consider actions that can be taken to promote social justice. (p. 3)

Rather than focus merely on the instrumental or linguistic aspects of literacy, critical literacy moves students deeper by encouraging them to examine the social, historical, and political context of both the reading and their own experiences. Through critical literacy, student engagement in sociocultural experiences becomes an intentional way of allowing a relevant and meaningful interaction with literacy skills to occur.

The instructional model for critical literacy developed by Lewison et al., (2015) can be used as a guide for utilizing classroom digital tools in a meaningful way. Through critical literacy, teachers build a curriculum based upon students' personal, social, and cultural experiences. These three areas are never isolated from the school curriculum. Interwoven within the critical literacy curriculum are the following critical social practices:

- disrupting the commonplace
- interrogating multiple viewpoints
- focusing on sociopolitical issues
- taking action and promoting social justice

These critical social practices merge with student digital experiences to create a critical literacy curriculum. By merging critical literacy with digital tools, teachers have the resources necessary to empower students to become critical consumers and creators of digital content.

Digital Tools for Supporting Critical Literacy

While educators might agree with the theoretical proposition of using digital spaces to encourage critical literacy, developing it within the classroom can seem like an overwhelming challenge. To encourage action, all learners - including adult learners- benefit from practical and concrete examples (Kopcha, 2012; Grossman & Salas, 2011). Exploring vetted, real-life classroom strategies for implementing critical literacy in the digital age can deepen the understanding of critical literacy and assist in actualizing the concept within the classroom. Each of the following sections offer a specific digital tool, a discussion of why the digital tool is valuable in supporting critical literacy, and an example of how to utilize the digital tool in a classroom.

BlendSpace

BlendSpace is a resource that educators may use as a method to curate resources. Many times, teachers want students to explore a topic through online research. While it is important for them to engage in web inquiry, the Internet is so vast it is easy for students to get buried in useless information. For students to explore a variety of resources covering a specific topic, teachers can review/identify credible sources and place them onto a *BlendSpace* page. *BlendSpace* pages can incorporate a variety of formats including news articles, blogs, PDFs, YouTube videos, and pictures.

The skill of interrogating an issue from multiple viewpoints is desperately needed in our current online environment. Utilization of *BlendSpace* can actually encourage an interaction between the text and the reader (Eason, Goldberg, Young, Geist, & Cutting, 2012). If the reader does not question the text, they are passively floating through the words. However, when the reader interacts with the text through questioning, he/she is constructing unique meaning and merging it with their own perspectives and social experiences.

A suggested process for the use of *BlendSpace* is to collect different sources all focused on one topic. For example, a specific sociopolitical issue like immigration could be a topic explored through the use of *BlendSpace*. Teachers could curate a variety of sources; each espousing a different stance on the targeted issue and share with their students who would then consider the who, what, when, where, and why of the digital texts (“Deconstructing Web,” 2012). This curation of sources in *BlendSpace* would allow students to practice analysis and evaluation skills necessary for the development of critical literacy. Students should consider the following in depth:

- 1) Who wrote this piece or established the website?
- 2) What is the purpose of the site or the text?
- 3) When was the text or site created?
- 4) Where does the information come from?
- 5) Why is this information valuable?

The emphasis on asking questions allows students the space to explore texts online within a framework that guides critical literacy. Likewise, teachers are not dictating to students the knowledge gained from the text; rather, students are constructing the knowledge together. Additional digital resources similar to *BlendSpace* can be found at *News ELA* and *EdTwist*.

Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Online Catalog

Students living in the digital age are incredibly visual and often have learned to communicate through a series of visuals. As a practice for the classroom, images can be “read” and analyzed in the same way students read and analyze texts (NCTE, 2005; Pantaleo, 2015; Schieble, 2014). Therefore, beginning with visuals, teachers can scaffold critical literacy practices. One particular tool for utilizing visuals is the *Library of Congress’s (LOC) Prints and Photographs Online Catalog*, which makes hundreds of their resources available on their website.

Helping students approach various sociopolitical issues through photography is one service offered through the *LOC Prints and Photographs Online Catalog*. Harste (2014) argued that the arts can connect to critiques of language, “Instead of thinking about literacy as a commodity...thinking about literacy as a social practice can be revolutionary” (p. 90). Harste’s work with students showed how using critical literacy as a social practice can be developed through the creation of multimodal literacies such as sketching, music, dance, and videos in a way that supports the growth of students’ analytical skills.

The *LOC Prints and Photographs Online Catalog* offers hundreds of historical photographs for students to engage in critical literacy practices. By allowing students to “read” these visuals, students can engage in analysis of the sociopolitical context of the photograph. A historical visual to encourage analysis from a critical literacy standpoint is Dorthea Lange’s photograph, “Migrant Mother.” This photo was taken in 1936 in a migrant farmers’ camp in California. The woman, who fled her family farm, is sitting inside an unstable tent, hand on her chin, lost in thought. She is surrounded by several dusty children with their faces buried in their mother’s drooping shoulders. Instead of the lecturing about the historical background of the photograph, we can encourage students to actively engage with the context of the photograph. Giving students a question prompt can help in the early stages of questioning. Using a prompt as simple as “I wonder...” can encourage student questions such as: “I wonder why she looks so distraught?”; “I wonder why the father is not there?”; “I wonder if those children belong to her?”; and “I wonder why the children look so frightened?”. These questions are driven by concrete evidence within the visual but later develop into abstract thinking about the sociopolitical context of the photograph. Additional digital resources similar to *LOC Prints and Photographs* can be found through the *TIME* magazine photo essays and the *Write About This* app.

Glogster

Glogster is a space where students can integrate both visuals and text to create content which advocates for an issue or topic. This integration of visuals and text allows students to develop a digital poster that can be shared and commented on by peers. Critical literacy encourages students to not just interrogate but also consider actions that can be taken to advocate for themselves or others. Exploring issues of social justice through critical literacy not only makes learning real-world applicable but also supports democratic ideas (Ciardiello, 2004; Kellner & Share, 2009; Noddings, 2013). In order to be democratic, our educational system must acknowledge all the working parts. There must be opportunities for students to analyze their own educative process and allow diverse perspectives to contribute to the conversation.

Glogster encourages the disruption of the common place by encouraging reflection over one's position and also creating a space for perspective sharing. Within the traditional classroom, the teacher stands as the authority. However, critical literacy practices encourage the teacher to critically reflect on their own position and power within the classroom. Digital spaces like *Glogster* assists in the decentralization of power and moves the teacher towards being a member of the learning community (Nandi, Hamilton, Harland, & Mahmood, 2015).

Teachers can allow students to discuss social issues from traditional literature read in class or allow them to brainstorm areas of society in which they could advocate. Once students have developed some of their ideas, they can begin to articulate their views on the social issue of their choice by piecing together visuals that represent the message they want to share. *Glogster* allows students to interact with critical literacy and the arts through a digital medium. Students are extending what they have read about a social issue into visuals that can create discourse within the classroom. Furthermore, creating a digital poster allows students to share their work with their own personal social media circle making their advocacy a part of their larger communal world. Additional digital resources similar to *Glogster* can be accessed through the apps *Padlet* and *Smore*.

StoryCorps.Me

The *StoryCorps.Me* App created by *National Public Radio* (NPR) can assist students by allowing them to create counter narratives to the status quo. In today's society, students are inundated with assumptions, stereotypes, and master narratives reflected in media, literature, and even in their own school textbooks; however, through critical literacy practices, teachers can create a space where students can question mainstream messages and offer an alternative narrative. In addition to encouraging agency in students, counter narratives can engage student voice and consequently model critical literacy practices by decentralizing the power of the teacher and exercising student voice. All members of the learning community are encouraged to share their knowledge and student knowledge is valued (Beeson, 2013; Godley & Loretto, 2013).

Montgomery (2014) researched fifteen third grade students who were exploring counter narratives. These counter narratives were based upon children's literature being read in class and were merged with the digital world via podcasts. Students created scripts for plays, interviews, and monologues to post on the podcast for all students in the class to hear. Montgomery reveals that not only did the third-grade students feel engaged by the podcast system for their counter narratives, but they also felt like they could have an impact on social issues by sharing their ideas through this digital medium.

NPR's *StoryCorps* began as a way to share every day American's stories. The broadcast is created by NPR staff, with the hope that it would encourage human connections between people. In the same vein as the *StoryCorps* broadcast, NPR created the *StoryCorps.Me* app. The difference is that the app is not limited to an NPR staff member conducting an interview. The *StoryCorps.Me* app is available to anyone who has a digital device. This app vastly broadens the space for sharing individual perspectives by allowing anyone with the app to interview someone and upload the interview where it becomes available to the public. Once the interview is uploaded and made public, it will also be archived by the *American Folklife Center* at the United States Library of Congress.

Animas High School in Colorado created a group project on *StoryCorps.Me* after three million gallons of toxic waste water flooded the Animas River. This project, “Voices from the Animas” was meant to share the unique stories of those living with the environmental disaster and break up the limited depictions created by the media. Students interviewed family members, individuals within the community and each other. In these interviews, individuals offer diverse and unique perspectives while also sharing thoughts on how this disaster impacted their thinking in regard to the environment. Animas High School utilized the “community” feature on the *StoryCorps.Me* app.

Through the “Community” feature the interviews are uploaded individually, but educators can create groups that enable students to create counter-narratives over a cohesive theme or access each other’s counter-narratives easily. It also allows listeners to see a cohesive movement among a certain group while still being able to access the individual counter-narrative. Additional digital resources similar to *StoryCorps.Me* can be found with the apps *Fotobabble* and *Podbean*.

Looking Forward

Technology is constantly on the move and new information from the digital world is continuously shifting. The amount of digital content is projected to double every two years, and students now have access to more than quadruple the amount of digital content and information they had previously (Gantz & Reinsel, 2011). In other words, the digital world will continue to grow. Students, now more than ever, must master the ability to question and adapt.

However, merely accepting digital resources into the classroom does not guarantee meaningful learning. While students are fully involved in the digital world, many still need to develop the critical literacy skills needed for citizenship within a democratic society (Bloom & Johnston, 2013; Mihailidis & Thevenin, 2013; Yin & Zhou, 2015). There are many digital programs that have been added to classroom curricula or school literacy programs that lack meaningful contributions to the learning process. Many of these programs are implemented as a “magic pill” to test scores.

It is important that education does not become technology rich, at the expense of becoming instructionally poor. For a digital resource to be meaningful, it must include elements of inquiry, problem-solving, student autonomy, collaboration, reflection, and real-world applications (Ertmer & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2013; Snape & Fox-Turnbull, 2013). Many school districts have attempted to stay at the forefront of technology through various avenues such as: Web 2.0 tools, technology bond issues, and placing a Google Chromebooks in every classroom. However, research shows superficial digital programs add little benefit to student success (Cheung & Slavin, 2013). When a teacher tosses in a website or adds a trendy technology to their curriculum, merely because they are attempting to meet a school or district mandate, it can become a part of a checklist mentality.

We must resist the urge to add digital resources that become nothing more than a digital worksheet or a digital lecture. An additive approach with technology is often times more harmful than good (Kuyatt, Holland & Jones, 2015; Lei & Zhou, 2007; Swallow, 2015). Technology must be utilized in a very intentional way that is meant to deepen or expand learning; otherwise, it can lead to student frustration. By engaging our students’ cultural knowledge of digital resources with our critical literacy practices, we can create a dialogical relationship in the classroom built upon shared, valued knowledge (Ng, 2012; Zammit, 2013).

To move beyond an additive approach, teachers can start with a few small steps. First, value all learners. Engage students in discussions about their digital lives and allow them to share in the collaborative investigation of meaningful digital tools. Second, process-wise, start small. Try to layer in one new digital tool each semester. Third, review the curriculum by using the critical literacy instructional model to adjust curriculum and support critical social practices. Fourth, make sure students are given all the support they need. Develop smaller scaffolding activities to help insure all learners successfully engage in critical literacy.

Conclusion

Educators today should view the digital world as both challenging and opportunistic. Students cannot partake in functional literacy and survive in the current digital world. Giroux (2010) argues that knowledge does not merely mean technical understanding or knowledge that can be measured in utility. This type of instrumental learning can lead to a dangerous future. Giroux asks us to consider the following question, “What kinds of education do young people need in order to become informed citizens capable of learning how to govern rather than simply be governed?” (p.380). In a world consumed with digital resources, critical literacy is necessary for students to become critical consumers of knowledge. Utilizing a critical literacy framework with digital resources in our classroom can provide us with an opportunity to engage and empower students for the 21st century.

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