Technology for Good or Evil? Asking Five Critical Questions of ClassDojo

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ClassDojo is a widely popular PK-12 classroom management platform. Recently, critical Ed-Tech scholars have advocated for examining whether or not educational technology is designed ethically. As such, we adopt a technoethical approach where we ask five critical questions about ClassDojo (Krutka, Metzger, & Seitz, 2022) to examine its pedagogical and ethical impacts. Our findings indicate that ClassDojo can reinforce behaviorist teaching and learning practices in exchange for pedagogically-sound practices.

Introduction

ClassDojo is a widely popular PK-12 classroom behavior management tool used by over 50 million teachers (ClassDojo, n.d.) and 90 percent of schools in the United States (Chaykowski, 2017). Marketed as a classroom management tool, "where classrooms become communities, (ClassDojo, n.d.), ClassDojo is a staple in PK-12 classrooms. As a platform, ClassDojo provides an online space where teachers and parents can share students' learning experiences in school and at home through photos, videos, and messages. At first glance, ClassDojo seems to be a resource that every teacher should use and will benefit from. However, upon further inspection, and partly driven by our own experiences with the platform, we question if it is ethical to use ClassDojo as a tool to "manage" learners. In this article, we conduct a technoethical audit by asking five critical questions of ClassDojo (e.g., Krutka, Heath, & Smits, 2022; Krutka, Metzger, & Seitz, 2022) to better understand if ClassDojo is designed ethically and the impact it can have on teaching and learning practices. This research contributes to an ever-growing corpus of critical scholarship employing technoethical approaches (e.g., Gleason & Heath, 2021). In addition to being of value to the field broadly, we argue that this article will be especially beneficial for pre-service and current educators. In the following section, we review relevant literature exploring the use of ClassDojo in PK-12 classrooms. We also leverage the work of critical educational technology researchers to frame our examination of ClassDojo. Lastly, we detail the steps we took to conduct our technoethical audit.

Literature review

Our initial interest in being critical of technology is inspired by the work of Audrey Watters (2019, 2021), who illuminates how beliefs and assumptions about teaching and learning, typically resting on behaviorist practices, often guide the development and use of educational technology. Leveraging Watters' (2019) work, we consider how technologies, like ClassDojo, have become a method for socially engineering classroom interactions. To prepare for this endeavor, we reviewed existing literature surrounding ClassDojo as a means to inform our "data collection" and our perspective.

Generally, research exploring ClassDojo identifies the potential it has for improving teaching and learning and often features a techno-solutionism ideology. For instance, Bahçeci (2019) found that ClassDojo is an effective method for increasing tenth-grade students' positive behaviors, that is, adherence to classroom social norms and academic studying habits. More specifically, Bahçeci identified that ClassDojo resulted in learners having a higher awareness of their behaviors and whether or not their behaviors needed to improve without prompting. Similarly, Cetin and Cetin's (2018) research with middle school students found ClassDojo to improve students' emotional and behavioral regulation skills and identified that middle school students generally had positive opinions of ClassDojo. However, critical scholars have argued that further inspection of ClassDojo reveals more troubling concerns. Manolev (2019) suggests that although ClassDojo may encourage positive behaviors (i.e., staying on task, being obedient, doing work quietly, etc.), it does not address the root cause of a behavior issue, in turn creating a "performative culture" where students act in a manner that will award them points. As a result, there is no guarantee that the behaviors that are performed will remain the same when the point system is removed. Further, Robinson (2021) argues that the public tracking of students' behavior data creates skewed power structures that reinforce teacher surveillance practices and leave students "feeling frustrated by perceived failure, stymied by a lack of agency, anxious about exposure, or nervous about surveillance" (p. 600). As a result of these surveillance practices, Krach and colleagues (2017) raise concerns regarding students' privacy and the impact these practices may have on students' health and well-being (see also Soroko, 2016).

With the immense popularity that ClassDojo has received paired with more critical critiques of ClassDojo's integration in PK-12 classrooms, we find it necessary to embark on a technoethical review of the platform. Technoethical audits (Krutka et al., 2019) are used to better understand if a technology is designed ethically. In particular, technoethical audits seek to generate a holistic understanding of a particular technology, the guiding principles embedded in the technology, and the impact the technology can have on teaching and learning practices.

Method and procedure

Our critical evaluation of ClassDojo began in an undergraduate Introduction to Technology in Education course. In this course, students (i.e., pre-service educators) are exposed to a wide range of educational technologies that they can consider for use in their future classrooms. Additionally, students evaluate popular classroom technologies, including how they can impact teaching and learning practices and the values and assumptions about learning that may be embedded in the technologies.

We first encountered the "ethics" of ClassDojo during a two-part class activity. Prior to this activity, students had been investigating how "sketchy" technological practices, like surveillance, are often integrated into popular educational technology currently used in PK-12 schools. In the first part of this activity, students spent about thirty minutes exploring the ClassDojo website, paying particularly close attention to how the site was designed, what sort of language was used to describe ClassDojo, including how the product was marketed and the promises it made to potential users. Ultimately, students revealed several positive characteristics, from the uplifting messages the site advertised to the cute monsters that were included on the homepage. In the second half of this activity, students revisited the ClassDojo website, however, this time their review was framed by Watters' (2014) critique of "teaching machines." Leveraging Watters' (2014) language, students raised several concerns, the impact of publicly displaying students' behavioral data on learners being the most prominent. Although this initial examination of ClassDojo resulted in several concerns, we recognized a need to take a more systematic approach to our investigation. So, we adopted Krutka and colleagues' (2022) five critical questions about technology to better understand the unintended consequences of using ClassDojo (see also Krutka et al., 2022). Following Krutka and colleagues, we use the following questions to guide our analysis:

1. What does society give up for the benefit of ClassDojo?
2. Who is harmed, and who benefits from ClassDojo?
3. What does ClassDojo need?
4. What are the unintended or unexpected changes caused by ClassDojo? And,
5. Why is it difficult to imagine our world without ClassDojo?

Using publicly available data, we briefly share our findings in the following section and identify the implications of our findings for both pre-service and current educators.

Findings

At first glance, ClassDojo is appealing with its simple interface, bright colors, and animated characters (i.e., Dojo Monsters), along with its branding reinforcing the idea that ClassDojo will "Engage students!" and "Communicate with families!" (ClassDojo, n.d.).

However, inspection of ClassDojo's terms of service reveals concerning data collection practices, including the privacy of its users. Agreeing to use ClassDojo can grant the platform access to students' "juvenile dependency records, medical records, social security numbers, biometric information, disabilities, socioeconomic information, political affiliations, religious information, search activity, and geolocation information," among other forms of personal data. Additionally, positive behaviors are encouraged by displaying behavior points for all students to see (e.g., Soroko, 2016). As willing users give up personal data to use the platform, ClassDojo renders its most harm on students with behavioral problems, or those students lacking emotional or behavioral support, and grants all students visual access to their peers' behavioral ranking. In turn, ClassDojo can reinforce teacher biases, and lead to teachers implicitly labeling "problem students" based on their behavioral data.

Further, and although it may be unintended, ClassDojo's tracking system places additional pressure on both students and teachers. This simple yet consequential system can perpetuate unhealthy competition standards that decrease students' participation and sense of belonging (Wang & Holcombe, 2010). Students may also become focused on their points instead of their educational growth, resulting in detrimental comparative habits. Similarly, it persuades educators to focus away from content instruction to desired behavior adherence. As current educators and pre-service teachers continue to be trained on the importance of classroom management, it becomes even more difficult to avoid tools that suggest that they can easily manage students' behaviors for them.

Discussion

Our review of ClassDojo reveals problematic pedagogical implications, especially in terms of how it can impact instructional practices. As current and pre-service educators, we advocate for critical reviews of technology use. Further, we hope this review prompts new pathways for how pre-service educators are introduced to technology and its capabilities throughout their training and coursework. We suggest that critical examination of technology becomes a focal point of teacher training, including how to evaluate the pedagogical impacts of emerging technologies holistically.

Furthermore, as we reflect on educational technology that is becoming increasingly available, we must be mindful of how technology can transform learning experiences positively and negatively. As Watters (2014) suggests, our aim should not be to condemn, but to better "understand, explicate, and to place in practice" (p. 46-47). Thus, we encourage greater emphasis on examining the design and ethical use of technologies that are being promoted for inclusion in schools and educational systems and argue for broader adoption of techno-skeptical practices. Our goal with this approach is not to suggest that technologies like ClassDojo are exclusively harmful, rather we use it as a reminder to not overlook dangerous drawbacks concerning data usage, privacy, and pedagogy (Krutka et al., 2019, Watters, 2019).

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