Transformation or Indoctrination through Critical Pedagogy: Strategic Planning, Digital Literacy, and Technology Infusion in K-12

Erika Acosta, Nicole Delgado, Terri Stockberger, Thomas Korang, Lynda Garvin, & Lauren Cifuentes

AECT
THE JOURNAL OF APPLIED
INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN

The impact of critical theory on students has sparked false accusations, leading to book banning and restrictive policies in the classroom. While some argue that teachers are being radicalized, scholars advocate for integrating critical pedagogy in teacher education to address the influences of media messages on students' thinking. Critical literacy involves recognizing and challenging societal power structures in media. To support diverse student perspectives, educators must understand social and cultural forces. Digital literacy is crucial for critically evaluating digital content and ensures safety and privacy. The graduate programs emphasize the application of critical pedagogy for infusing technology in schooling to prepare culturally diverse students. The importance of critical media education is emphasized by the essential task of fostering intelligent, critical thinkers among students as they interact with media.

Fostering Critical Media Literacy in Education

False accusations regarding the presumed negative impact of critical theory on school students have emerged in response to culturally relevant, sustaining, and transforming curricula (Burmester & Howard, 2022). These accusations resulted in book banning and other policies that negatively impact what teachers are allowed to do in their classrooms. Some believe that teachers are being radicalized by their professors (Benson, 2021).

However, many scholars and teachers believe that the ubiquity of media messages that influence students' thinking indicates a profound need for inclusion of critical pedagogy in teacher education programs (Giroux, 2020). Educators need to know how to prepare students to be smart, critical thinkers as they consume media (Hostetler & Luo, 2021).

To be critically literate means that one is able to recognize, reveal, critique, and challenge societal and institutional power structures in media messages. Social structures and cultural customs are at the root of social problems. In order to prepare educators to teach in schools, they need to understand social and cultural forces at play and be prepared to support their students' diverse perspectives. Lewison et al. (2002) describe four components of critical literacy: disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple viewpoints, focusing on sociopolitical issues, and promoting social justice. Additionally, digital literacy skills keep people safe, maintain their privacy, and help individuals evaluate digital content through a critical and analytical lens. Our Educational Design and Learning Technologies graduate programs require our culturally diverse students to apply critical pedagogy for technology infusion in schooling.

Example 1: Explore a Topic

In a course entitled Critical Digital Literacy, students select a controversial topic in education. Topics of choice have included brain development and social media, self-esteem and social media, evolution, gender and mathematics, vaccination, climate change, and the 1619 Project. Students explore perspectives, identify relevant evidence, describe the impact of bias and power on people's points of view, and discuss the relevance of the issue to social justice and literacy. They spend the first half of the course identifying resources to inform themselves of the role that digital literacy plays in the controversy. They read about the importance of applying a critical lens to digital materials (Allen-Brown, & Nichols, 2004; Choi, 2016; Goering & Thomas, 2018; Hinrichsen & Coombs,2014; Kellner & Share, 2019; Morris & Stommel, 2018; Pandya, 2019). They write and post their essays to their blog in the second half and produce an audio recording, an infographic, a Tweet, and several visualizations regarding their topic. By sharing their productions with each other, they broaden their perspectives regarding digital literacy.

One student's productions focused on the controversial 1619 Project. A common criticism is that the project revises American history and questions the accuracy of the stories emerging from the contributors of the project (Magness, 2020). Proponents of the 1619 Project call into question the historical accuracies of certain events and historical figures that our education system holds as absolute truths (Morel, 2020). Authors of the 1619 Project are asking readers to use their critical literacy skills to disrupt common threads of historical 'accuracies' by revisiting what they know as historical facts. Book banning, micromanaged classrooms, political attacks, funding tied to student performance, and restrictive curricula are just some repercussions educators face.

Example 2: Teamwork to Write a Strategic Plan

In another course, Technology, Society, and Education, students spend the term in small groups developing strategic plans for infusing the Internet of Things, immersive technologies, games, social media, artificial intelligence, and data analytics in a school. They read works by scholars who espouse the importance of applying a critical lens to digital materials (Benjamin, 2019; Eubanks, 2019; Greengard, 2021; Jenkins, 2009; Pangrazio & Selwyn, 2019; Rheingold, 2012; Woodley & Rice, 2022). Their assignment is to embed critical approaches to technology adoption in their plans by exploring the potential of each technology to impact the user's agency, power, abuse of power, or bias. They also investigate the extent to which the technology developer considered issues of equity, race, gender, representation, and authority in their product development. Both plans described here were presented to schools.

First, the vision presented to a preschool that serves children with Down syndrome is to create an educational environment whereby students, families, and staff can learn, access, and use best practices, research-based methods, and state-of-the-art technology within and across the educational environment and community. Parents can learn how to use technologies to support their children's development.

Second, a local charter school serves K-12 students and specializes in technology, multilingualism, acceptance for all, and restorative justice. To ensure success of the students as future leaders, the commitments to students include interacting with multiple forms of technology. A central technology infrastructure ensures all students have internet accessibility and have the best opportunities to succeed in an ever-changing tech-based society.

Discussion

Students' conceptions of digital literacy transformed into a combination of traditional and critical skills. Traditional conceptions of digital literacy consist of digital citizenship, ethics, engagement, and safety. They include technical skills for locating and interpreting information and data. Using digital tools, including text, signs, symbols, emoticons, slang, and pictures, to communicate meaning, feeling, and understanding is also an element of traditional digital literacies toolkits (Hobbs, 2017; Talib, 2018). And, of course, the ability to create digital documents, audio/visual files, presentations, graphics, and social media literacies. For educators, abilities to learn and teach using digital technologies are part of the definition of digital literacy (Dede and Richards, 2012).

Students in our graduate programs define digital literacy to include both traditional and critical elements. By exploring the relationship between digital literacy and educational-issues from a critical lens and by embedding critical elements in plans to infuse emerging technologies in schools, educators in our graduate programs are able to conduct meaningful and transformative experiences to positively impact society (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Traditional and Critical Digital Literacy Elements Combined to Define Digital Literacy
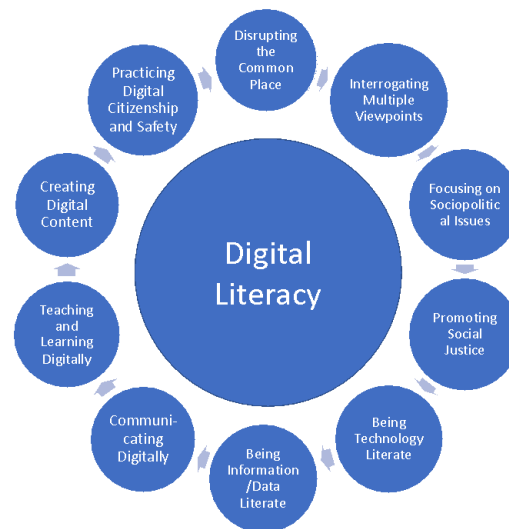
Our discipline should focus beyond the traditional path to digital literacy to include lessons learned when educators apply critical theory and pedagogy. Given that focus, students conduct meaningful activities for high impact.

References

Allen-Brown, V., & Nichols, R. G. (2004). 9. Critical Theory and Educational Technology. *Handbook of research on educational communications and technology*, 2004, 1-29.

Benjamin, R. (2019). Race after technology: Abolitionist tools for the new jim code. Social forces.

Benson, E. (2021, September 1). *Using "critical media literacy" to indoctrinate America's children.* Return to Order. https://www.returntoorder.org/2021/09/using-critical-media-literacy-to-indoctrinate-americas-children/

Burmester, S., & Howard, L. C. (2022). Confronting book banning and assumed curricular neutrality: A critical inquiry framework. *Theory Into Practice, 61*(4), 373-383. https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2022.2107343

Choi, M. (2016). A concept analysis of digital citizenship for democratic citizenship education in the internet age. *Theory & research in social education, 44*(4), 565-607.

Dede, C., & Richards, J. (Eds.). (2012). *Digital teaching platforms: Customizing classroom learning for each student*. Teachers College Press.

Eubanks, V. (2018). *Automating inequality: How high-tech tools profile, police, and punish the poor*. St. Martin's Press.

Giroux, H. (2020). *Critical pedagogy*. Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden.

Goering, C. Z., & Thomas, P. L. (Eds.). (2018). *Critical media literacy and fake news in post-truth America.* Brill.

Greengard, S. (2021). *The internet of things*. MIT press.

Hinrichsen J., & Coombs A. (2014). The five resources of critical digital literacy: a framework for curriculum integration. *Research in Learning Technology*, 21. https://doi.org/10.3402/rlt.v21.21334

Hobbs, R. (2017). Create to learn: Introduction to digital literacy. John Wiley & Sons.

Hostetler, K., & Luo, T. (2021). Managing cognitive load in information literacy instruction. *Educational Technology Research and Development, 69*(2), 583-606.

Jenkins, H. (2009). *Confronting the challenges of participatory culture: Media education for the 21st century* (p. 145). The MIT Press.

Kellner, D., & Share, J. (2019). *The critical media literacy guide: Engaging media and transforming education.* Brill.

Lewison, M., Flint, A. S., & Van Sluys, K. (2002). Taking on critical literacy: The journey of newcomers and novices. *Language arts, 79*(5), 382-392.

Magness, P. W. (2020). *The 1619 project: A critique.* American Institute for Economic Research.

Morel, L. E. (2020). A Review of the 1619 Project Curriculum. *Backgrounder.* No. 3570. Heritage Foundation.

Morris, S. M., & Stommel, J. (2018). *An urgency of teachers: The work of critical digital pedagogy.* Hybrid Pedagogy.

Pandya, J. Z. (2018). *Exploring critical digital literacy practices: Everyday video in a dual language context.* Routledge.

Pangrazio, L., & Selwyn, N. (2019). 'Personal data literacies': A critical literacies approach to enhancing understandings of personal digital data. *New Media & Society, 21*(2), 419-437.

Rheingold, H. (2012). *Net smart. How to Thrive Online.* The MIT Press.

Talib, S. (2018). Social media pedagogy: Applying an interdisciplinary approach to teach multimodal critical digital literacy. *E-learning and digital media, 15*(2), 55-66.

Woodley, X., & Rice, M. F. (2022). *Designing Intersectional Online Education.* Routledge.