Chapter 7
Paulo Freire’s Liberatory Pedagogy: Rethinking Issues of Technology Access and Use in Education

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores why there is a need for scholars to not only systematically couple discussions about technology use along with technology access, but ground their inquiries in a theory of critical multiculturalism as they seek to fully understand ways for minimizing the digital divide. In order to help explain why using this critical framework is important, this discussion is set against the historical backdrop of the country of Brazil whose past in many ways parallels the United States with regard to its history of oppression and servitude of people based upon their racial heritage. Moreover, this work provides a brief discussion of Paulo Freire’s work with African Brazilians and how he helped them to develop critical understandings about how hegemonic structures limited the extent to which they were able to experience their own humanity. This chapter draws from the historical experiences of African Brazilians as a way to deconstruct how issues of technology and educational inequalities are examined in the U.S. The author of this chapter claims that if U.S. educators are to help prepare students to become productive and reflective decision-makers, they must first acquire tools for understanding their own social realities and learn ways for re-creating them to reflect the ideals of democracy and social justice. Furthermore, the author made calls for educational scholars develop a new language that captures the spectrum of questions at the center of the digital divide debate concerning access and use, but also foregrounds issues of liberation, agency and social change.

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INTRODUCTION

Within the scholarly universe of literature about technology and its so-called revolutionary role in reforming K-12 education, there has been ongoing debate about what constitutes the digital divide and how it can be ameliorated (Atwell, 2001; Warschauer, Knobel & Stone, 2004; DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, & Robinson; 2001). The scope of this debate in U.S. schools is often shaped by a binary structured argument of technology access vs. use. More specifically, one part of this dialectical is that students’ access to computer-related technologies is a predominant factor in creating equal educational outcomes. The assumption that serves as the basis for this argument is that if a student has physical access to the technology both in and outside of school, then problems and issues associated with the digital divide will be alleviated. The oppositional construct, technology use, is formulated by the notion that the way in which technology is employed can have a significant impact on the production of unequal learning outcomes due to students’ different race, class, and gender identities.

Whereas scholars (Atwell, 2001; Pomerantz; 2001) have made claims about the plausibility of both sides of the binary and have drawn conclusions such as “minorities and the poor are less likely to own computers and have Internet access at home compared to their middle-class, White counterparts” (p. 253) or “increasing student computer literacy skills would make them more competitive and functional in their world” (p. 512). What is most apparent is that the education outcomes reflected in both arguments are grounded within a discourse of liberal multiculturalism, a very popularly held philosophical position in a majority of schooling institutions throughout the United States (Kincheloe and Steinberg, 2002; McLaren cited in Duarte & Smith, 2000; Sleeter & Grant, 2007). Within this particular discourse, an educator’s orientation towards teaching and learning tends to be focused on removing perceived barriers that work to limit the ability of a student who is typically labeled as at-risk, poor, or minority so that they achieve the same learning outcomes as their mainstream, high-SES, and White counterparts. McLaren (cited in Duarte & Smith, 2000) elaborates on how liberal multicultural perspectives are reflected in notions about social equality:

From the point of view of liberal multiculturalism, equality is absent in the U.S. society not because of Black or Latino cultural deprivation but because social and educational opportunities do not exist that permit everyone to compete equally in the capitalist marketplace. Unlike their critical counterparts, they believe that existing cultural, social, and economic constraints can be modified or “reformed” in order for relative equality to be realized. (p. 219)

Dominant epistemologies espoused by schools determine what is considered official school knowledge and how it should be measured. Therefore, in the context of technology reform, both arguments in the debate, presuppose that by providing students with access to technology or ensuring that it is used in ways to effectively promote their achievement are the only acceptable ways of removing those barriers. I argue that we must go beyond solely using liberal multicultural oriented optics of technology access and use to examine questions about how to bridge the digital divide. Educators must search for critical social theories that explain how technology can be used to help prepare students to become productive and reflective decision-makers who can participate effectively in an increasingly interdependent world—a critical goal for K-12 education in the 21st century.

In this chapter, I will explore why there is a need for scholars to not only systematically couple discussions about technology use along with technology access, but also ground their inquiries in a theory of critical multiculturalism.