

Chapter 72

21st Century New Literacies and Digital Tools as Empowering Pedagogies for Urban Youth of Color

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ABSTRACT

Increasingly, more youth of color are gaining access to multiple forms of digital and popular media, yet 21st Century Literacies are virtually absent from the curriculum in most schools that serve them. By contrast, their increased knowledge of digital tools is usually met with restrictive access. For example, in many urban public high schools, cell phones are seen as contraband and students are required to “check” them at the door. Additionally, access to the Internet and social media platforms are blocked on most computers to which students have access while in school. More research is needed on how race, gender, ethnicity, and language intersect with access to digital tools in schools. This chapter presents a dialogue about the positive impact of using 21st Century New Literacies and digital tools with Black male middle and high school students. The authors highlight ways that teachers can effectively use digital tools in their classrooms.

INTRODUCTION

In American schools across the country, Black and Latino youth, and more specifically males, find themselves in a precarious position: they are consistently talked about and treated in ways that threaten their social and academic success (Haddix, 2009; Howard, 2013; Hucks, 2011; Noguera, 2003; Sealey-Ruiz & Greene, 2011b; Toldson & Lewis, 2012). Often, they are positioned as those students most in need of disciplinary action (Skiba, Nardo, Peterson, 2002) and academic remediation, and the ones who

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are least qualified for gifted and talented, and honors programs. These same youth often attend schools where there is limited access to high quality afterschool and tutoring programs, as well as enrichment programs in the arts and technology. As a society, if we continue to underfund the public schools mostly relied on by Black and Latino children, we will maintain the existing access gap between them and their White peers (who often attend well-resourced schools), and ensure Black and Latino underperformance on academic achievement measures (Ladson-Billings, 2006) for years to come.

The authors believe that educators should be concerned with the prevalence of a new kind of ‘digital gap’ between urban youth from working class and/or low-income communities and their peers who attend school in more economically affluent, White middle class environments. When newer technologies are available, students of color often do not have immediate access to these innovations because they are not readily available in their schools (Hobbs, 2012). Yet, it has been proven that when given access to these technologies, children who have had limited access quickly adapt and gain command in using them (Kaiser, 2010). We are not suggesting that the “digital divide” has disappeared; there is still reason to be greatly concerned about this, even as urban youth of color purchase and use mobile devices, and engage in online social networks in record numbers (Kaiser, 2010). Rather, we call for an examination of the ways in which youth of color are using these newer technologies, and how their increased access to digital tools and digital media is being positioned in schools and in research.

In our research we advocate for a shift in the discourse -- away from binaries created by access and performance -- toward notions of equity that qualify and contextualize digital disparities within local and societal histories, values, languages, and perceptions of success and disproportion. In other words, we argue that merely providing students with technology and online education, (even in varying degrees), and offering them training to meet curriculum and technology standards will not ensure access to social, cultural, and economic capital. Instead, real dialogue and action are needed to address and counter widening academic and digital gaps that persist within and beyond our current education system. In this chapter, we invite readers to engage in dialogue with us about the digital gap facing urban youth, and offer some implications for digital literacy education for youth of color in today’s classroom.

As middle and high school literacy teachers, and as scholars in the fields of English and urban education we have observed how some youth are being encouraged to be the builders, creators, and producers of these digital tools and spaces in official school environments while others are not. Addressing and countering any kind of achievement gap requires having open and honest dialogue about its underpinnings and enacting curricula, pedagogy, and educational policies for transformation and change.

Indeed, the “digital divide” is no longer merely a question of access, but as Yang (2007) argues, one of power and control. He writes,

Bridging the digital divide reveals a deeper divide, in which poor, urban, immigrant youth are not full citizens of society. ...marginalized youth often appropriate their newfound digital literacies to curse the state of inequality. Specifically, youth create subaltern public spheres, so-called subcultures, through such media as MySpace and text messaging. So framed, the “digital divide” is therefore an ideological divide and should refer to the antagonistic ideologies surrounding the purposes of new media. On one hand, charitable educators and government agencies seek to increase access to the information highway in order to produce compliant citizens for a global economy. On the other hand, youth subvert these resources to become counter-citizens, indulging in pleasure, resisting the “civilizing” project of education, and in some cases, organizing for the disruption of that very global economy (p. 12).

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