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Nurturing #TeacherVoice: Why Educators' Online Presence Matters to Educational Equity

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When we think about the intersection of educational technology and equity, we often restrict our focus to concrete issues such as access: specifically, access to devices or to high-speed Internet. In particular, research and scholarship in the area often addresses the so-called “digital divide,” that is, the gap that results as “those denied access to ICT skills and knowledge become less-and-less capable of participating in an economy and a society that are increasingly technology-dependent” (McNair, 2000, p. 9; for an overview of the research in this area, see, for instance, the meta-analysis conducted by Wang, McLee, and Kuo, 2011). Certainly, the issue of access is an important concern, as it is one of the most basic steps in ensuring equity. However, short of teachers spending their own money or crowdfunding through sites like Donors Choose, there is often little that individual educators can do when it comes to ensuring access to technology; moreover, constraining our focus to such a specific concern can cause us to overlook the many other complex ways in which equity issues play out in the world of educational technology.

So instead of focusing our attention on access to digital tools or connectivity, which is frequently beyond individual teachers' control, I suggest that we instead broaden the conversation to think about what educators *can* do with technology to increase educational equity. One initial step might be simply to reframe our understanding of the issue by thinking not just about “educational technology” (which would seem to imply physical tools) and instead asking what equity in education looks like in an increasingly digital and technology-rich world. Specifically, we might turn our focus to the ways in which online spaces might support, or undermine, narratives of educational equity. In this editorial, I will explore what I believe to be a critical — and frequently overlooked — aspect of equity in education today: that of teacher voice (or lack thereof) in online spaces.

Technology and the Amplification of Marginalized Narratives

While the link between technology and equity may not always be clear, there *is* evidence that technology is a powerful support for social justice causes. The research is clear: for Millennials, technology — specifically social media — has become a platform for civic engagement. A 2013 Pew study found, among other things, that in the year preceding, a full 67% of 18-24 year olds had taken part in a social media-related political activity, and 43% of all social network users had gone on to learn more about a particular issue after reading about it online (Smith, 2013). Additionally, even online “slacktivism” (less engaged activities such as retweeting and sharing posts) can have a positive effect: a 2015 study determined that “peripheral users in online protest networks may be as important in expanding the reach of messages as the highly committed minority at the core,” that is, the mobilization that is made possible by those outside of the core of the movement plays a key role in spreading and sustaining political movements (Barberá et al., 2015, para. 20).

Technology can also give provide a greater platform for causes that might otherwise go overlooked in the mainstream media. In a powerful article, Tufekci (2014) noted that the presence of the trending #Ferguson hashtag on Twitter played an important role in bringing the police shooting of unarmed teen Michael Brown to the attention of the nation - a function of Twitter's hashtag “folksonomy,” which essentially amplifies the topics that are most-tweeted-about, regardless of users' individual network makeup and size. (Of note: issues such as the attack on net neutrality and the filtering algorithms employed by companies such as Facebook are cause for serious concern, as they endanger the equal weighting of marginalized perspectives online). As well, livestreaming apps

such as Periscope and Meerkat have been powerful tools for engaging online audiences in real time, sharing “the visceral experience of what is happening on the ground—and mak[ing] it much more tangible because it is ‘now’” (Gregory, 2015). Gregory also underscored the power of such apps for ensuring accountability, noting that when used to stream activities such as protests, the live nature of the video “makes us all, even if we are not in the same physical space, direct witnesses to rights violations.”

What is potentially even more important is social media’s power to amplify individual voices, particularly those that have traditionally been marginalized. Perhaps one of the greatest examples of this phenomenon is “Black Twitter,” a name often given to the collective voice of black users of the social network. Workneh (2016) noted, “In 140 characters, Black Twitter has helped reaffirm and redefine the black experience, as well as revolutionize the ways in which black people around the world can connect and collaborate.” In particular, Black Twitter played a key role the growth of the #BlackLivesMatter campaign, with the Twitter platform providing “an outlet for amplifying crucial issues of racial injustice and police violence in America” (Workneh, 2016).

Clearly, there is much potential for the use of social media to draw attention to social justice causes. So how does all of this relate to equity in education? Well, while technology has not solved issues of inequitable access to schooling, we might imagine that the *EQUITY + EDTECH = ?* equation could involve educators (and in turn their students) taking up the unique affordances of social media to amplify discussions of social issues and inequities. After all, educators are expected to act as role models both inside and outside of the classroom; in fact, in a 1996 decision, the Supreme Court of Canada enshrined this responsibility into law, noting that, “Teachers are seen by the community to be the medium for the educational message and, because of the community position they occupy, they are not able to ‘choose which hat they will wear on what occasion’” (Ross v. New Brunswick School District No. 15, 1996, para. 44), and a similar expectation for teachers seems to hold true in the United States as well. Thus it seems reasonable to expect that teachers would continue to wear their “teacher hats” in online spaces and model active citizenship in their digital lives. The trouble is that the reality doesn’t always live up to this expectation. In fact, in my experience, teachers are often noticeably absent when it comes to addressing social justice issues online.

Before we continue, I should note a few things. First, I am assuming here that teachers, on the whole, have a vested interest in working towards equitable education and that they are generally happy to advocate for justice issues that affect education in their face to face contexts; that is, that it is only in online spaces that educators are silent about these causes. And secondly, I am aware my experiences are not representative of *all* experiences; I am drawing here on the last six years of working as an adjunct instructor in a teacher education program, as well as the past four years of being actively involved on several social media platforms in a professional capacity. There are certainly exceptions to the rule, and I am always eager to hear about and connect with teachers who are promoting equity - educational and otherwise - in digital spaces.

Understanding the Null Curriculum: When Silence Speaks Louder Than Words

So why does all of this matter? To be clear, there are many reasons why the nature of teachers’ online presence matters, but perhaps the most important is this: If we as educators are online, and we remain silent about issues of social justice, if we tweet only about educational resources and not about #BlackLivesMatter (which, I would argue, is deeply related to educational inequities and the school to prison pipeline), if we blog only about new tech tools and not the horrific conditions in many of America’s public schools, we are sending a clear message: These issues are not important. Indeed, silence speaks just as loudly as words — the absence of teacher

engagement in discussions that relate to equitable education creates what Eisner (1985) described as a null curriculum: an absence or void in what is taught or discussed that carries with it a powerful lesson about what does and does not matter. As educators, we are modeling for our students (and the world) that it is fine to keep our mouths shut about important issues while we are online.

So how do we change the narrative being told by teachers' online contributions? First, we need to understand what is keeping educators from engaging with social issues on the Internet. In my doctoral research, which centers on how pre-service teachers discuss social justice in digital spaces, I note the major concerns that my students (future teachers) frequently express (Hildebrandt, forthcoming). First, many cite the idea that "good" teachers are neutral; thus, to become a teacher requires taking up a narrative that, according to Britzman (1991), "expects teachers to shed their subjectivity to assume an objective persona" (p. 25). This belief then leads pre-service teachers to share what Veletsianos (2014) has termed an "acceptable identity fragment" (para. 3) that is "intentionally limited and structured" (para. 5) so as to present a sanitized, safe online presence.

Secondly, concomitant to the narrative of the teacher as neutral is the fear that discussing "controversial" issues online will make these future educators unemployable (or, as I have often observed in the case of practicing teachers, that raising said issues will lead to disciplinary action). Essentially, many express the belief that discussing social issues that relate to inequities in education is dangerous because it may cast the teaching profession in a negative light, which is often explicitly disallowed by codes of ethics. While there is a decided lack of research in this area, it is difficult to imagine a teacher being penalized for calling out racism or prejudice (extreme examples notwithstanding).

Rather, in my experience these hesitations often conceal an underlying desire to avoid the discomfort of facing up to issues such as privilege and systemic racism. That is, what my students are unwilling to express is that discussing these issues is often difficult even in private. Confronting issues such as racism and privilege frequently leads to resistance, particularly amongst the largely white, middle class group of students who make up our teacher education program. And while unpacking that resistance is a task too large to tackle here, suffice it to say that if these conversations are hard in face to face settings, the thought of doing so openly and in a permanent forum is a major challenge. Nonetheless there are steps we can take to make these discussions less formidable. First, it's important that we break down the "teacher as neutral" narrative. Nothing about education is neutral; the very idea of schooling is, in many ways, intended to shape young people into good citizens of the society in which they live. To quote Freire (1985), "Washing one's hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral" (p. 122). Thus, when my students say "neutral," what they really mean is "aligned with the status quo." Understanding this key distinction is, in fact, critical to beginning any conversation about educational equity: it's crucial that we can see our education systems as not value-free but, in fact, *value-laden*, as this allows us to identify the ways in which the current structures of schooling privilege some groups and marginalize others. In turn, we can shift from the idea of discussing "controversial" issues online to the understanding that we are actually just bringing conversations about equity and oppression into the digital sphere.

Next, we need to create online communities where educators (and future educators) can practice teachers can practice engaging with difficult topics in a supportive environment. In my doctoral research, one of my students noted that it was helpful to begin blogging about social justice issues in the context of a class, where student blog posts were aggregated in a central hub; she felt it was easier to speak in the midst of what she termed a "community of discomfort," that is, a space where she was not alone in grappling with difficult ideas (Hildebrandt, forthcoming). Teacher-specific Twitter hashtags and Facebook groups are just two additional possibilities for creating

safe(r) digital spaces where educators can get their feet wet in before taking the plunge into fully public spaces; of course, the ultimate aim should be a gradual release onto the open web.

Finally, as teacher educators, we need to be sure that we are modelling active engagement with social justice in the digital sphere. Ultimately, my stance is this: I have a responsibility to use my privilege to speak out and to use my online networks in ways that promote equity and call out injustice, rather than projecting a “neutral” and comfortably sanitized teacher-self. Being an educator in a digital age necessitates our thoughtful participation in digital life; we can no longer cling to “safe” topics of conversation, and we can no longer allow our silence to speak in our stead.

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