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Critical pedagogy and digital liberation: A Freirean debate for SoTL

Sandra Abegglen[1], Tom Burns[2] and Sandra Sinfield[2]

Abstract

This article examines digital inequality through the lens of critical pedagogy, as defined by Paulo Freire, and as articulated by bell hooks. It posits that digital inequality is an extension of broader socio-cultural disparities, and scrutinises the implications for lecturers and students in a digital-centric academic environment. The discussion extends beyond the mere availability of digital tools, and addresses the need for institutional paradigm shifts, fostering creative practice that empowers all participants in the educational process to engage with digital tools effectively. The critique of 'Technology Enhanced Learning' (TEL) focuses on its role in Higher Education and employability, advocating for a re-evaluation that centres on the individuals most impacted by digital educational policies.

Keywords

digital inequality, critical pedagogy, liberation, technology enhanced learning, widening participation

[1] University of Calgary, Calgary, Canada

[2] London Metropolitan University, London, UK

Corresponding Author:

Sandra Abegglen, School of Education, University of Calgary, 2500 University Dr NW, Calgary, AB T2N 1N4, Canada

Email: Sandra.Abegglen@ucalgary.ca

Introduction

This co-written, collaborative article joins the discussion on digital inequality using Paulo Freire's (2018) lens of critical pedagogy and liberatory teaching. It also draws on bell hooks' (2014) recognition that social classifications (e.g., race, gender, sexual identity, class, etc.) are interconnected, and that unless we teach to transgress intersectional systemic injustice, we create oppression, preventing an inclusive society. The article offers the premise that digital inequality is more than a discussion about who has access to laptops and broadband; it is multifaceted and part of larger socio-cultural inequalities—and broader discussions about 'voice' and agency in academic space. We discuss what it means to be a lecturer and student in an academia that relies heavily on digital technology, especially when operating with a widening participation agenda; working with those who have typically experienced educational rebuff, those who are excluded from powerful discussions within education, those who are ignored or sidelined (Abegglen et al, 2022). We argue that it is useful to question 'Technology Enhanced Learning' (TEL), not just in terms of access to technological hardware, the Internet, software applications and tools, and the 'ICT skills for business' (Sinfield et al., 2009), but also with respect to the institutional, academic and cultural capital that allows (all) educators and students to use the 'digital' with ownership and power—for research, study, and 'action'. The unquestioning drive and focus on TEL within UK Higher Education (HE) and beyond that exists for employability needs to be (re)surfaced and distanciated: examined from a detached or objective standpoint. To 'make strange' so we can see more clearly and discuss dialogically. We posit that we need to begin education, including digital education, by focusing on the people involved—the students—a foundational concept in Freire's pedagogy that emphasises understanding learners' contexts and experiences, and actively integrating their voices and hopes.

Why a collaborative piece on digital inequality?

Starting from where we are, we, the three authors, are a dispersed collective of education professionals who have worked, researched, and co-authored together for many years. We are situated in what Hall (2021) entitles 'The hopeless university' and collaboratively acknowledge problems, issues, and concerns within HE. We also embrace 'radical hope'—to move us from stasis to action; to generate a shared sense of, and hope for, digital (university) education 'otherwise'. Through collaboration and the creation of this assemblage, the act of writing for us generates something new—something deeper, richer, and more expansive. It provokes thought, evokes emotion, and fosters an emergent praxis of collaborative inquiry (Gale & Bowstead, 2013; Gale et al., 2012; Wyatt & Speedy, 2014) into digital inequality and what we can collectively do to address it.

Collective writing aims to gather diversity rather than replicate uniformity (Peters et al., 2021). It acknowledges that "Ideas do not emerge from a vacuum. They are integrally interconnected to the contemporary world, whether acknowledged by their authors or not" (Peters et al., 2016, p. 8). Collaborative writing takes this a step further, an evolutionary leap, arguing that joint writing brings together different and diverse voices in emergent and novel ways. As such, collaborative writing has particular pragmatics and ethics: as a 'coming together'; as 'being with' (Nancy, 2000); as heteroglossia (Bakhtin, 1981); as 'making strange' (Shklovsky, 1990); as observational tool (Magnusson, 2021); and as a method of inquiry (Gale & Bowstead, 2013)—offering an authentic triangulation that

builds on the subjective and auto-ethnographic as valuable entry points to deeper analysis.

This writing—the collaborative wrestling with ideas, the boundary crossing, this back and forth, this up and over, the falling down and getting up again, this sharing, underscoring, deleting and reinstating, the threading and rethreading of thought—pushes us towards a different understanding, through a continuous struggle for meaning-making (Jandrić et al. 2022). It is a form of 'resistance' in itself, a sustainability and stability in these times of hyper uncertainty. Greene (2007) considers it an approach that is sometimes deemed countercultural since the academic norm, particularly in the humanities, is the lone scholar, and the 'gold standard' writing product is the single-authored monograph. However, we suggest that collaborative writing is something that is "more scholarly, more insightful, and more in touch with the real than the traditional scholarly document" (Hamon et al., 2015, para. 4)—and it is essential 'tool' with which to think through and 'tackle' issues in education, including digital education.

Outsider students and insider tech

For years, governments in the UK (and elsewhere in the world) have pushed technology and the harnessing of technology as an unproblematic good for the betterment of 'UKPLC'—a concept adopted at that time by a Labour cabinet minister that frames the country as a public limited company, emphasising education as contributing primarily to economic performance (Sinfield et al, 2009). Terms like TEL emerged in government policy documents, seeking to shape the imagination of educators and policy makers alike, asserting that technology 'can only', and 'must' and 'does' enhance learning. With documents like 'Harnessing technology' universal technology strategies were imposed on education without interrogation or an evidence base (Sinfield et al., 2009). Examples in that document insist that tech enables 24/7 access to services; that students can study anywhere and anytime, anywhere; and that 'problem students', those with 'cognitive impairments', can be plugged into remedial packages to be 'fixed'. However, any focus on what is taught and why students are motivated to learn is notably absent from the conversation and the pedagogies that arose from this.

Whilst personally enjoying the challenge of making the online learning space creative, engaging and embodied, we note the wider and typically unquestioned wider discourse that exists around digital education: that it is somehow and unquestionably a 'force for good'. However, there is little evidence that technology indeed enhances learning—and digital technology itself is neither neutral nor objective (Freire, 1996). Wider social and structural inequalities can create, sustain, and even enhance digital inequalities just as they do with educational ones (Althusser, 2012; Bowles & Gintis, 1975). Because of this, we wanted to (re)discover inspiring, practical examples of how educators and students could harness digital education for liberatory purposes—for agency and 'action' in a supercomplex, uncertain world. We started as Freire started, with the students and their lecturers in all their humanity—their strengths, their frailties, their burning hopes (Farag et al., 2021). We acknowledge the pressures on staff and students, starting with where they are—and where they want to go. This demands openness and trust as well as imagination, creativity and experimentation; and an ontological shift in thinking and practice—not checklists and corrective deficit fixing but the use of digital technology in our classrooms for liberatory purposes.

Ironically, it was just as education was ostensibly opening up to more diverse students, that HE set more, and higher, hurdles for the new student to leap (Lillis, 2002; Molinari, 2022)—and the lecturer who was supposed to be teaching these students was plunged into frenzied action to engage with digital technology not for learning but to prepare a workforce with the skills required by industry (Sinfield et al., 2009). We join the discussion on understanding exclusion and digital inequality through the lens of Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy. We argue that, just as education itself functions as part of the ideological state apparatus (Althusser, 2012) with a colonising agenda, the digital within education has been mobilised to create various crises. These include the erosion of academic freedoms for both educators and students within a system of hypervigilant surveillance. Based on this, we problematise the notion that technology automatically grants access and enhances teaching and learning (Bayne, 2015). We suggest instead that both educators and students need to be granted the freedom to critically and creatively experiment with digital education, and the digital within education, for liberatory purposes (Freire, 2018; Stommel, 2014)—for agency and 'action'—and also to resist some of the bigger movements and developments in the education sector (such as gated access to software and tools, and the application of monitoring devices).

The alienated academic and the weaponised student: Raising questions about digital inequality

Today's technology is ubiquitous: faster, bigger, better - often sweeping away human connections—and freedoms—in its wake. Despite being 'more connected', we actually become more isolated and lonelier (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, 2021). Technology 'demands'—rather than enables. For example, it demands that students have laptops and high-speed Wi-Fi, and that educators are available 24/7, tech-savvy, and able to teach online and face-to-face simultaneously whilst developing parallel courses in the institution's Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) to 'capture' student thought and regulate their actions. Education has changed. Whilst publicly valorising equity and diversity, it has become more hierarchical, unequal and supercomplex (Abegglen et al., 2020a, 2020b; Barnett, 2000). Government agendas, from the 'Harnessing technology' document to the relentless output from the so-called Office for Students (2024), insist only on HE for employability, social mobility, and increased salaries (Shellard, 2018). Hall (2018, 2021) describes this marketised and commodified neoliberal university as an abject space predicated upon 'more for less': alienated and micro-managed academic labour-power, unable to engage meaningfully with crises of knowledge reproduction—with technology part of the regime of oppression. Consequently, teaching excellence is determined not by creative and dynamic pedagogy, but by the salaries that graduates receive. As Hall (2021) asks: is it possible to refuse the University as a trans-historical space that can only exist for capital?

Figure 1. The alienated academic. Credit: Authors' personal archive.

And: what of the student in these reduced times? In the Machiavellian University, the student is as super-surveilled as the alienated academic (Figure 1)—the object of hypervigilant data-collection. Students, rather than organising themselves for their own liberation, are co-opted into management agendas, involved as 'students-as-partners' to 'monitor' staff teaching and enhance metrics. As Tett, citing Bourdieu and Passeron, puts it: "Education could be the royal road to the democratisation of culture if it did not consecrate the initial cultural inequalities by ignoring them" (Tett, 2000, p. 190).

Figure 2. The hopeless university. Credit: Authors' personal archive.

Barnett (2000) openly challenges reductive notions of HE and asserts the main pedagogical task of a university is not to transmit knowledge but to develop students' attributes appropriate to the conditions of supercomplexity—something more open, uncertain and ineffable. Barnett (2004) calls for a pedagogy that prepares learners for an unknown future, a pedagogy that fosters and supports human qualities that help students in standing up to the world and engaging with it purposefully. "What is called for, therefore, is a creative knowing in situ" (Barnett, 2004, p. 251). Concerning digital education, then, we need to interrogate the unquestioning way digital ubiquity has been harnessed in HE to strip away so much of what so many of us thought university was for: academic freedom—the time and space to investigate the world and ourselves (Figure 2). We need to actively and consciously problematise the way that we discuss digital inclusion and equality—to help us rethink learning and teaching itself in more equal terms.

Liberation: The Freirean classroom

> The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy. (hooks, 1994, p. 12)

Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator and philosopher, was a fierce advocate of critical pedagogy, a philosophy of education and a social movement that developed and applied concepts from critical theory and related traditions to the field of education and the study of culture, proposing a more equal relationship between teacher, student, and society. While most of Freire's work, including 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' (2018—first published in Portuguese in 1968, and in English in 1970), was written before digital technology and the Internet entered the classroom on a larger scale, the writing offers valuable pointers for rethinking digital inequalities in education (see, for example, Johnston et al., 2021). Freire (2018) posits that education, as with technology, is not neutral, objective, measurable, and apolitical. Those who are oppressed need to be given the freedom to express themselves, in their own words, in their own spaces—and:

> Any situation in which some individuals prevent others from engaging in the process of inquiry is one of violence. [...] to alienate humans from their own decision-making is to change them into objects (Freire, 2018, p. 85).

There is something profound in Freire's attempt to harness education for liberation: to work with the oppressed to fight back and to regain their power—to find their words—to have their humanity recognised. If we apply this to digital education (or the digital in education), there is much reflection and 'making strange' needed: a hermeneutic kaleidoscope (Kuhn et al., 2023). We all need to see things differently—to challenge the ubiquity of digital tools that place staff and students back in the lecture theatre; the sage on the stage 'transmitting' via screen rather than playing with ideas and engaging with troublesome knowledge, a technical straitjacketing that forms and shapes content and process. These TEL systems and practices are in themselves hallucinations—offering the fallacy of knowing, solidity and closure. Only when an epistemological shift towards uncertainty has been made, when we question and challenge our very practices in the name of liberatory education, can we start creating social and digital equity.

If we acknowledge digital despair as a possible problem and adopt a Freirean perspective together with a liberatory thrust, then rather than viewing the lecturers and students only in terms of what they are not: not traditional, not prepared for digital higher education, and not digital natives—we can tackle digital access and use it more positively. We bridge the digital divide not by 'remediating' staff and students alike; rather, we can develop an owned and agentic digital proficiency with a playful and minimally invasive education (Mitra & Rana, 2001) process akin to Sugatra Mitra and his 'Hole in the Wall' (Mitra, 2012) experiment.

The Hole in the Wall

In 1999, Mitra and his team at NIIT University, Kalkaji, New Delhi, India, literally carved a 'Hole in the Wall' that separated the university from the slum next door (Mitra, 2012). Through the hole, slum children had free access to a computer. With no prior experience but driven by their curiosity and the freedom to explore, students learned to use the computer, surf the web, and develop the knowledge and skills they wanted—without the intervention of a teacher. When we apply Mitra's philosophy to our (widening participation) students and their agency, developing digital literacy more on their terms, we accept them as capable of driving their own learning, without the need for an all-knowing lecturer. This leads us to discuss our own module and our 'Develop a Digital Me' project (Burns et al., 2018).

In our undergraduate 'Higher Education Orientation' module, our goal was to make transparent the forms and processes of HE and to place our previously sidelined students in a powerful relation to these processes (Reay et al, 2009). We wanted them to successfully study and learn, enabled to become academic more on their own terms, not passively socialised into a colonised bourgeois academia. Our students typically have a sense of incongruence and displacement on entering HE. Many experience a sense of low self-esteem and low self-efficacy and whilst they may want to develop, grow and transform—they encounter many barriers and hurdles (see, for example, Ping, 2010). We employ creative and ludic practice (Winnicott, 1971) to create a modular third space "redesigning what counts as teaching and learning of literacy" (Gutiérrez, 2008, p. 148). We play with practice and engage in processes that place students powerfully in their own learning—they learn through role play and simulations; they undertake real research with creative qualitative methods; they make and interpret collages, multimodal artefacts, representations of ideas, concepts and systems—and all the while they discuss and reflect—they analyse—and they write to learn. Through liberatory ludic practice we enable students to find their own voices in the exclusionary, competitive, and often hostile higher education environment (Abegglen et al., 2014; Abegglen et al., 2015).

With digital education we were similarly playful: we challenged our students with developing a 'Digital Me' (Burns et al., 2018). Rather than quizzing students about their lack of digital knowledge and skills and teaching them to become digitally literate for study or employment, we asked them to use an unfamiliar digital tool to make a digital artefact that would introduce them to the other students in the group. This task was deliberately evasive—students could introduce themselves digitally, or they could introduce their digital selves, or some combination of the two. We built class time in the computing labs to scaffold the activity and supplied some senior students as mentors to act as 'guides on the side'—helpful and supportive—but not directive and instructional. We also asked the students to be creative and have fun. At the end of term, rather than an

assessment point, we had a celebratory ‘event’ that incorporated an exhibition of their digital artefacts.

The students produced a range of animations and video essays that spoke of who they were. They supported each other, they enjoyed showcasing their work, feeling heard and seen, and they delighted and surprised us. Most importantly, however, they engaged themselves in authentic digital education—as a liberatory endeavour.

Conclusion

One aspect of digital inequality in education stems from the fact that government, management, and technocrats determine digital strategy divorced from the realities of the pedagogues who enact post digital practice and the students who are subject to it (Burns et al., 2023). Twenty-first-century education needs to be given the space and time to play and develop—and to make the space and place in the curriculum for creative opportunities for emergent learning—for its own intrinsic value and to counter current reductive and transactional educational narratives propagated by government, especially with respect to who is included seamlessly in academia and who is systematically ‘othered’ and excluded. As Sugata Mitra (2012) has demonstrated, and as we argue, we cross the digital divide by believing in people—staff and learners—and recognising them as the human beings they are.

Recommendations

1. **Acknowledge and address supercomplexity**: Recognise the supercomplex nature of the digital world and education, particularly its impact on marginalised, widening participation students. Develop strategies to support those from disadvantaged backgrounds, who face unique challenges in a postdigital landscape.
2. **Embrace student diversity**: Ensure that educational practices acknowledge and celebrate the diversity, humanity, and cultural wealth of all students. Understand and address the uncertainty and fragility that comes with inequality within the education system.
3. **Promote equitable access to technology**: Recognise that access to and use of technology is not a given for all students. Implement policies and pedagogies to ensure equitable access to digital tools and technologies for students from all backgrounds.
4. **Foster digital experimentation**: Design challenges and tasks that encourage students to experiment with digital tools for self-expression, exploration, and creative emergence. Empower students to use digital technology on their terms (Stommel et al, 2020).
5. **Support staff and institutional creativity**: Encourage imagination, creativity, openness, and ingenuity among educators and institutions to create a learning environment that supports diverse digital practices.
6. **Develop inclusive structures and processes**: Create structures and processes that facilitate lecturers and students' ability to engage with and navigate discourses of power and exclusion. Ensure that everyone can participate in educational activities with agency and confidence.

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