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Commentary: Critical Digital Literacies as Action, Affinity, and Affect

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■ It is not surprising in this era of fake news, online toxicity, Instagram-induced depression, and algorithmic sorting, that teachers, parents, policy makers, and even the CEOs of social media companies have all come to see the importance of 'critical digital literacies'. But, what it means to be 'critical' is different for different stakeholders depending on the nature of their 'stake' in people's digital media use. The ways Mark Zuckerberg wants you to be critical are different from the ways 'media watchdogs' might want you to be critical, which are also different from the kinds of criticality promoted by anti-vaccine activists.

The most common view of critical digital literacy, influenced by approaches to media literacy developed in the 1980s, is that it is chiefly about teaching students to 'think for themselves', to be 'skeptical' about what they read or watch online, to search for the 'hidden agendas' of the people who create content, and to 'do their own research'. While these things certainly constitute a big part of critical digital literacies, approaches which focus solely on this kind of 'cognitive criticality' are, at best, impoverished, and, at worst, as danah boyd (2017) has pointed out, might even backfire—witness, for instance, the discourses of skepticism and 'independent research' that underpin a lot of online conspiracy theories.

Thankfully, the authors of this series of brief reports offer a more nuanced and holistic view of critical digital literacies, one which, recognizes that literacy is not just about how you think, but about what you *do*, that reading and writing online (and 'critiquing' what we read)

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is never just an individual cognitive exercise, but always a *social* act with implications for our social identities and our place in the communities we belong to, and that criticality is always *situated*—what it means to exercise criticality is different for different kinds of people in different contexts. They also recognize the embodied, ethical, and even 'emotional' dimensions of critical digital literacies, the fact that our ability to exercise criticality depends as much on how we *feel* about what we see online as on what we think about it. Finally, they recognize that deciding what critical digital literacies are and how to teach them or learn them must come from conversations among all stakeholders—teachers, students, parents, policy makers, and even the CEOs of social media companies—because the problems that students are facing—not just those of fake news, online toxicity, and Instagram induced depression, but also the challenges brought on by climate change, war, and global pandemics—can only be solved by all stakeholders coming together not to forge shared opinions, but rather shared commitments to community and citizenship.

In what follows I will suggest, based on some of the insights offered by the contributors of these pieces, three foundations upon which these future conversations about critical digital literacies should rest, namely, attention to 1) *action* (what critical digital literacies are for and what they can enable people to *do*), 2) *affinity* (how critical digital literacies grow out of social relationships and how they impact how we treat one another), and 3) *affect* (how critical digital literacies are inevitably tied up with felt experiences; how people are *affected* by online texts and interactions and how they can *affect* them).

ACTION

One theme that runs throughout these pieces is the idea that digital literacies are not primarily about thinking, interpreting, to even 'meaning making', but about *doing things* in the world, a theme which resonates with the guest editors' intentions to explore ways students can *use* technology to participate *agentively* in online and offline spaces. Action, for example, is the basis for both of the perspectives on digital literacies that Weninger (this issue) attempts to reconcile in her teaching: the 'skills based' perspective promoted in official policy documents and the 'practice based' perspective advocated by 'New Literacy' scholars. They just approach action from different directions, one seeing action as a matter of 'competence', the ability to master particular tools, and the other seeing it as a matter of 'contextualization', the ability to integrate tool use into larger social contexts and into social practices that are valued by various communities.

For some of these contributors, the focus on action is part of a larger *activist* agenda in which the ultimate goal of critical digital literacies is to help students change the world. Jiang and Gu (this issue), for instance, talk about digital literacies in terms of 'leveraging digital technologies for social-justice-oriented action and change,' and Ehret and Becerra Posada (this issue) give examples of teachers helping students to enact 'political change' within their communities. Even Yi, Cho, and Jang (this issue), in their overview of innovative ways of researching digital literacies, advocate methods, and tools which empower participants to 'play a more agentive role' in research, exploring, and reflecting on their own digital practices and experiences.

In order to empower students as learners, activists, and 'researchers' of their own practices, scholars, and teachers of digital literacies will not just need to facilitate students' involvement in ambitious projects for social change. They will also, and more importantly, need to help them to attend to the small, sometimes mundane actions they take with digital technologies (why they click on this or swipe on that), and to understand how their ability to act is inevitably enabled or constrained by the tools that are available to them, tools which are usually designed to advance the political or economic agendas of other people. At heart, digital literacies studies are about figuring out how agency is *distributed* across users, technologies, and institutions (such as schools, governments, social media companies), and helping students to (re) claim their ability to take action within these configurations of actors.

The very first questions we need to ask when considering how to approach the teaching of digital literacies, then, are 1) what do we want students to be able to *do* with their literacies?, and 2) what kinds of tools, competencies, and political perspectives will they need in order to do these things? As the authors of these pieces remind us, the answers to the questions will not be the same for all students: students in less technology-rich contexts like the rural villages in Colombia that Ehret and Becerra Posada (this issue) describe as they will for high-tech consumerist cultures such as that of Singapore where Weninger (this issue) teaches, and so the tools and capacities we need to provide students in these contexts with are necessarily different.

AFFINITY

Whoever suggests that the goal of critical digital literacies is to help students learn to 'think for themselves' has an overly simplistic view of both thinking and learning. Thinking, as Vygotsky asserted more than a

century ago, is not an individual cognitive act, but a social activity—we think and learn in collaboration with others using the tools our societies make available. The whole point of becoming 'literate' is not learning how to think 'independently', but learning how to think and act *with* other people in ways that promote independence and innovation.

Much of the foundational work on digital learning and literacy has emphasized the 'participatory' nature of digital cultures and how informal learning online takes place in the context of what Gee (2004) calls 'affinity spaces'—groups of people who think and act together based on shared interests or goals. Successful classroom interventions, such as those described by Weninger (this issue) and Ehret and Becerra Posada (this issue) are also usually based on principles of affinity, creating the conditions for students to learn and think together in the context of group projects about things they care about. And, as Jiang and Gu (this issue) point out, this is also the best way for teachers to develop their professional competences and formulate creative solutions to the teaching of digital literacies.

But there is also a dark side to affinity—wefor just as social groups can help people think and learn and forge healthy and productive social identities, they can also encourage conformity, tribalism, and suspicion of outsiders. This is especially true online where social media algorithms amplify particular ways of thinking and even push like-minded groups toward more extreme viewpoints. Moreover, the dynamics of affinity are always subject to power relations both within groups, as members negotiate positions of status and expertise, and between groups, as some affinity spaces become aligned with and supported by powerful institutions and others are marginalized and denigrated (Weninger, this issue). While affinity often grows out of and fosters inclusivity and conviviality, it can also promote exclusivity and hostility.

Just as critical digital literacies need to engage students with more fundamental questions about action and agency, then, they also need to engage them with more fundamental questions about affinity—questions about how we form and maintain social bonds, how our thoughts, and actions are ultimately dependent on these bonds, and whether or not we are 'hanging out' (both online and offline) with people who help us to open our minds rather than close them; questions about how we treat other people online (and off), and how we would like others to treat us; and questions about how digital technologies affect our social relationships and the different forms of inclusion and exclusion promoted by different tools and platforms. We also need to consider where affinity fits in with our own teaching and learning, what kinds of relationships we are fostering in classrooms, and with other teachers and researchers, and whether or not

these relationships are productive of criticality. Finally, we need to consider the role of relationships and affinities outside of educational contexts, not just in the informal online spaces that Gee talks about, but also in the more formal spaces of governments, non-governmental organizations, and even commercial concerns like social media companies, in either enabling or constraining the development of critical digital literacies. Teachers and students are not the only ones who need to develop criticality and reflexivity—policy makers, politicians, and CEOs of tech companies also have a thing or two to learn.

AFFECT

The third foundation upon which conversations about critical digital literacies must rest is an awareness of the centrality of *affect* when it comes to reading and reacting to online content, interacting with others, and integrating our use of digital tools into our emotional, social, and political lives. Affect has long been a 'neglected' literacy, either ignored in favor of more 'practical' issues like cognition and competence, or dismissed as too 'messy' or 'risky' to address in formal educational contexts. Recent revelations about the devastating effects social media can sometimes have on the psychosocial well-being of young people, as well as about the ways social media algorithms are designed to promote affective responses such as outrage in order to increase engagement (Merrill & Oremus, 2021; Seetharaman et al., 2021), however, are wake-up calls that affect cannot be ignored.

It cannot be ignored because all communication has an affective/relational dimension (it's hard to say anything without in some way communicating our attitude toward what we are talking about and whom we are talking to). When it comes to social media, this affective dimension of communication gets filtered through a whole new set of semiotic tools (such as 'likes' and 'streaks' and 'shares') that create whole new 'affective geographies' (Anderson, 2014: 18; Ehret & Becerra Possada, this issue) for users to navigate. But we do not just communicate affect through digital media. Media also engage us in affective relationships, compelling us to check our phones every few minutes, sending surges of dopamine through our brains with every ping or buzz that comes from them.

The importance of attending to affect is, of course, most evident in Ehret and Becerra Posada's article, where they talk about the 'affective atmospheres' created by digital media and how these affect the way students think and learn, how they relate to others, and whether or not they are able to embrace opportunities for agency. But it is also a subtext in the other articles, in the references to digital 'well being'

that Weninger finds in policy documents and the way she tries to engage students in 'creative digital play' in her classroom, in Jiang and Gu's calls for approaches to digital literacy that 'foster commitments to empathy,' and even in the ways the innovative research tools introduced by Yi, Cho, and Jang provide students with ways to communicate not just what they think about their online practices, but also how they feel about them.

Affect is about more than just emotion in the conventional sense; it is, as Spinoza put it, about the capacity to affect and be affected, linking it ultimately to the questions about agency I raised above. It is about how intensities 'emerge, circulate, and coalesce' (Anderson, 2014:48), pointing us toward questions not just about how different kinds of contents 'go viral' online, but also about how particular feelings and attitudes do as well, affecting our ability to evaluate viral content. Attention to affect also opens up space to consider the role of the body in our discussions of criticality, how the body is increasingly integrated into online communication (through, e.g., selfies and TikTok videos), and how we think with our bodies as well as our minds (Gee, 2020).

The fundamental questions a focus on affect raises for teachers and students of critical digital literacies include questions about the kinds of affective practices and affective routines that digital media make possible and channel us into (and how 'healthy' or productive these practices and routines are); questions about how affect can be exploited by online actors with particular political or economic agendas, and how it can be harnessed in the service of social activism and change; and, most importantly, questions about what kinds of literacies actually 'matter' to our students (Darvin, 2019), and how they matter.

Teaching critical digital literacies, or criticality more generally, will always involve navigating the kinds of 'tensions' that Weninger (this issue) talks about, tensions created when different people and institutions with different agendas and values come together. This is especially true in an increasingly polarized world where truth seems slippery and what children get taught in schools can become the subject of fierce political debate. It's easy for criticality to be reduced to exercises in deciding who's right and who's wrong, or worse, who's good and who's bad. But, as Weninger reminds us with the 'visioning' exercise she invites her students to do, the most powerful interventions do not always involve asking students to 'decide'; sometimes they involve asking them to imagine. The foundations of action, affinity, and affect can provide students more solid ground upon which to stage these imaginings and to engage in productive conversations about what's true, what matters, what is possible, and what kind of world they want to make.

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