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Soft(a)ware in the English Classroom

(Re)Framing Education for Equity: Acknowledging Outputs *and* Inputs in Literacies Education

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The Importance of Framing

How we frame a problem delineates the range of possible solutions. If a parent of a small child notices that the child walks differently than other children, the assumption that the child has a problem walking might lead to a medical appointment or physical therapy—when perhaps properly fitting footwear is all that is needed. (Or possibly a greater appreciation for, and valuing of, the many different ways small humans can get from one place to another.)

The way that our field of English education frames what and, at times, *who* are problems requiring solutions is at the heart of meaningful teaching and learning. Software and digital technologies play a role in the framing that grounds current educational reform policies in and beyond our field; a framing that works both to

obscure and perpetuate inequitable systems. Software and digital technologies contribute to seemingly neutral educational policies and practices that obscure issues of structural racism, opportunity and access, and the privileging of a limited understanding of what it means to be literate and educated.

How does this work? Simply put, this obfuscation works through an achievement gap framing that moves the reform conversation from a focus on inequities to a discussion of outcomes and accountability. In the 1960s, when conversations about race and equity were just beginning to reach much of White America, there were acknowledgments that separate and unequal schools and other social systems were at the core of the drastically different outcomes. The 1980s gave rise to an education reform movement that focused not on these inequitable input gaps but instead output gaps such as test scores (Darling-Hammond). This shift moved reform from the work we need to do around opportunity gaps (Milner) and education debt (Ladson-Billings) to a hyper-focus on measuring the outcomes of inequitable educational systems.¹ This shift is problematic, as there is a medium-to-strong correlation between a student's family or

community socioeconomic status and academic outcomes (Sirin). Our society's history and legacies regarding race and racism, as well as related relationships to class, are obscured through neoliberal educational policies that espouse accountability, market competition, and privatization as the answers to disparate educational outcomes (Mayorga and Picower). Students are converted into data points (Lynch, "Mustard Seeds"), framed and positioned in ways that can keep us from learning more about, and supporting, their strengths. This masking creates a sense of a neutral playing field structured by standards documents, testing, high expectations for students and teachers, and perverse notions of accountability (Golden, "There's Still"). High expectations, standards, assessments, and meaningful accountability are worthwhile; yet, on their own, they are no substitute for the substantial work we, as a society, need to do around the issues of race, class, access, and equity that are at the core of these outcomes. With the reform conversation's laser-like focus on measuring outputs, corporate profiteers take advantage of the market-based competition-driven approach to offer promises of a silver bullet educational

product that will magically cure all that ails our deeply inequitable educational system (Fabricant and Fine; Karp; Saltman). This, in turn, leads to what I have termed a Potemkin Village approach to change: the pretense of improved outcomes through the use of these “quick-fixes” and selective representations of data that also serve to obscure lived realities and continuing inequities (Golden, “Education Reform”).

The Role of Software and Digital Technologies

Software systems and digital technologies play a central role in this masking, as well as the shift from inputs to outputs, in two ways: first, in terms of how student needs are framed, and second, in purporting to provide the resources to meet these needs. First, the framing of student needs: just as many students initially accept something simply if it appears in print or on a screen, the data that are produced through these measuring systems are assumed to have validity. When we are presented with a spreadsheet that purports to represent an objective measure of a student, there is a sense that a scientific analysis has delineated the learner’s abilities. These representations of reality, however elaborate or impressive, are fundamentally selective and provide teachers and learners options under the guise of choice, and menus in lieu of exploration. Further, these sorts of data are presented as neutral, produced through binary systems that work to erase the realities of structural racism and class that can limit

opportunity to achieve in formal education.


Increasingly, software systems and digital technologies are presented as the solution to disparate outcomes within the current educational reform movement. The silver bullet is now often a “silicon bullet” of a metadata analysis or personalized digital curriculum that will provide the needed learning and data-outcome edge (Lynch, *Hidden Role* 1). These new technologies are marketed as harnessing and optimizing the “best practices” that deliver college- and career-ready skills to deficit-laden learners, furthering the deprofessionalization of teaching.

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This is of particular importance in our field of English education. The current literacy standards document, the Common Core, overemphasizes argumentative and evidence-based writing genres at the expense of other valuable modes of communication (DeStigter). Evaluation in our field is central to the shift from inputs to outputs; literacy has been reduced to an ability to produce a limiting form of evidence-based writing under pressure during a high-stakes test. These tests, the measuring of outputs and the lynchpin of the current reform movement, have done little to close achievement and equity gaps and often serve to blame teachers and learners

for continuing inequities² (Luke; Rose). Reducing literacy to a software-driven score on one genre of writing allows for a “single story” to be told about each student (Behizadeh), one that may limit powerful pedagogies.

A Vision of Meaningful Reform

Those of us who are teachers, teacher educators, and researchers must challenge the narrative that these selective representations of data offer. We must fight² for a society that invests in education in equitable ways while recognizing that funding is necessary but not sufficient: equitable investment does not guarantee improved outcomes, but insufficient funding does guarantee limited opportunity (Fabricant and Fine 119). We must also recognize that the correlation between academic outcomes and socioeconomic status is not the same as causality. There are viable generative practices we can employ to support learners, provide meaningful literacies education, and work for equity. What I argue constitutes a meaningful literacies education is grounding our work in positive relationships with adolescent scholars (Golden and Womack). It is imperative that we challenge current framings to value our learners’ multiple literacies, cultural resources, and individual strengths. In focusing our assessment on learners’ strengths instead of software-generated deficit framings, we can work *with* adolescent scholars to recognize and value their literacy practices while expanding their literacy competencies. 

Notes

1. In discussing the shift from inputs to outputs, I do not intend to frame these issues in terms of individual or communal deficits. I want to recognize gross social and materials inequities and the role they play in educational outcomes while *also* acknowledging the need for our field and society to value multiple literacies. Historical and current cultural dominations also play a central role in terms of what is considered a legitimate literacy practice, and who can be considered literate. For more on this, see David E. Kirkland's *A Search Past Silence: The Literacy of Young Black Men*.

2. I recognize that many of our colleagues see the current reform movement, standards, and accountability measures as a means of holding educational systems accountable for a strong education for all learners. While this may hold true in some fashion in particular local spaces, we must acknowledge that this framing and work alone will not lead to the opportunity for educational excellence for all learners.

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