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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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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. 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...
provide teachers and learners with frameworks that help them frame and reflect on their work. These representations of reality, however elaborate or impressive, must be validated, as it is not sufficient to simply present them as neutral, produced through binary systems that work to erase the realities of structural racism and class that can limit students' opportunities to achieve in formal education.

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. This is of particular importance to many students initially accepting these kinds of data. The literature review (Golden, "Hidden Role") shows that the data is 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. 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.

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 students' opportunities to achieve in formal education.

Software systems and digital technologies play a central role in this continuing inequities (Golden, "Hidden Role"). These new technologies are marketed as harbingers of educational reform, but their impact and outcomes are complex and often serve to obscure lived realities and conceal power imbalances.

We must fight for a society that invests in education in meaningful ways that recognize and value our learners' multilingual literacies. This is not the same as teaching reading and writing, but it requires a shift in how we measure and value learners' abilities. We must also recognize that the data we collect about student needs is not always accurate, as it is often produced through binary systems that work to erase the realities of structural racism and class.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the role of software and digital technologies in education is profound and far-reaching. They provide frameworks for learners and teachers to frame and reflect on their work, but their impact and outcomes are complex and often serve to obscure lived realities and conceal power imbalances.
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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 material 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.

Works Cited


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