Leveraging Digital Literacies for Equity and Social Justice

Detra Price-Dennis and Selena Carrion

This column describes possibilities for using digital literacies with tweens as a platform for investigating issues of social justice.

“A kid like me could take these issues all the way to Washington.”

Cornell, 5th-grade student

“I believe we are all activists.”

Juan, 5th-grade student

When Cornell, Juan, and their class visited a social justice exhibit at the Museum of the City of New York, they engaged in a conversation with a film crew working on a documentary about the museum. When asked by the museum docent what they believed “activist” meant, Juan said, “I believe an activist is someone who fights for rights and keeps on doing it until change happens.” Although Juan and Cornell were the ones featured in the documentary, their classmates held similar stances toward activism and social justice. The children were all students of color, mostly first- and second-generation Caribbeans, bilingual, and from working-class families. Given their diverse identities while situated in a community within the Bronx, we aimed to nurture their voices in a society that often marginalizes their ideas, experiences, and commitments.

In our work, we think about social justice as an ideology that informs the actions we take to address systemic inequities in our society, especially for tweens like Juan and Cornell. They represent an age group that straddles the line between childhood and adolescence, experimenting with ideas and practices that include digital and media platforms. We leverage these digital literacies as a site for activist work with tweens.

Our work with tweens confirms that their everyday literacy practices traverse multiple sign systems and modalities that are increasingly tied to technology. As two literacy educators of color working in New York City, we (Detra and Selena) are committed to creating inclusive and equitable learning environments for marginalized youth that capitalize on these literacy practices in academic settings. A recent Pew Research report noted that 92% of teens are online each day because of access to mobile devices (Lenhart, 2015). While research has afforded us a glimpse into how teens use technology and interact in digital spaces (e.g., Ito et al., 2010; Jenkins, Ito, & boyd, 2016), not as much attention has been paid to tween technology use in or out of school. In our experience, though, social media and technological tools are playing an increasingly large role in the daily communication practices for the tweens in our classes.

Given the investment Selena’s school has made in technology, the literacy practices in her fifth-grade classroom have become more connected to technology as a tool for processing, composing, and communicating. To better understand how this investment could inform her teaching, we embarked on a two-year collaboration to explore how we could infuse criticality with digital tools and then...
insert that into the literacy curriculum to promote inquiry, enhance student learning, and generate action toward social justice. Detra was a participant-observer in Selena’s class two or three days a week across two years. Detra also created an after-school digital literacy club with students and facilitated a weekly lunchtime book club.

As we began our work together, we documented and reflected on varied ways students expressed interest in topics related to current events or community-related concerns. We collected and analyzed project-based artifacts, transcriptions of class discussions, photographs of students working together, and individual student work samples in order to name specific ways students were becoming informed advocates for social justice. The students were interested in a range of topics from #blacklivesmatter to religious intolerance and terrorism abroad. Many of the issues (e.g., segregation, gender binaries, gang violence) were directly connected to their experiences living in New York City. For example, when students were interested in police brutality (a topic relevant to communities in the Bronx), they used Flipboard to curate a collection of news articles as a way to learn more about the issue; they also shared stories from family members about their experiences, created glogs (interactive digital posters), and printed posters to share with the school community.

Many individuals/groups taking a stand against systemic inequities have turned to digital tools, specifically social media, to engage the public in conversations about social change and action as well as to draw attention to issues of exclusion and discrimination (e.g., #IstandwithAhmed, #Blacklivesmatter, #1000Blackgirlbooks). We wanted to build on the students’ interests in equity, activism, and technology to cultivate a community of learners with a similar inclination toward advocating for social change. We began this process by purposefully selecting digital tools that encouraged students to collaborate with each other about social issues (i.e., Google Classroom; Padlet; AnswerGarden), create content about those issues (i.e., Flipboard; Glogster; VoiceThread), and connect their learning to others (i.e., Meme Generator; Tumblr; Wix). See Table 1 for additional information about these digital tools.

In the sections to follow, we share two benefits of leveraging tweens’ digital literacies as a means to examine issues of equity in our society. We illustrate how incorporating digital tools 1) provided layered opportunities for students to develop multimodal ways of knowing and 2) supported students in becoming agents of change.

**Developing Multimodal Ways of Knowing**

As literacy teachers who draw from culturally relevant and responsive approaches to teaching (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nieto & Bode, 2008), we firmly believe in the need to incorporate our students’ funds of knowledge (Gonzáles, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) and vast literacy experiences in our practice. This includes centering digital tools in the curriculum to ensure opportunities to work with a variety of print-based and digital modalities and platforms. Across each unit of study, students were encouraged to develop their own inquiries and work across a variety of modalities, such as writing and performing spoken word poetry, creating memes, designing glogs, and making collages to share their learning. Because student choice was pivotal in this process, many projects incorporated technology. The students had access to computers, tablets, laptops, and wireless Internet (there was a 1:1 ratio for many of the digital resources). The classroom was also equipped with a Smart Board and tools that allowed students to wirelessly connect their tablets and computers to the projector.

The purpose for thinking with digital tools is to promote engagement, support differentiation, position students as producers of content, and create space in the curriculum to nurture their inquiries while expanding their technological strategies and skills. For example, when students worked on platforms like Glogster or VoiceThread to share questions or new understandings about a topic of interest, they were participating in a practice that honors divergent literacy practices while merging...


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<thead>
<tr>
<th>App/Web 2.0 Platform</th>
<th>Web Address</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Affordances</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Google Classroom</td>
<td><a href="https://classroom.google.com">https://classroom.google.com</a></td>
<td>Blended learning platform</td>
<td>Increases accessibility, Provides a system for turning in assignments, Promotes collaboration</td>
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<tr>
<td>Answer Garden</td>
<td><a href="https://answergarden.ch/">https://answergarden.ch/</a></td>
<td>Digital space for brainstorming ideas</td>
<td>Promotes collaboration, Helps students share multiple perspectives</td>
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<tr>
<td>Padlet</td>
<td><a href="https://padlet.com/">https://padlet.com/</a></td>
<td>Digital corkboard</td>
<td>Promotes collaboration, Helps students gather resources, Increases accessibility, Offers multimodal options</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wix</td>
<td><a href="http://www.wix.com">www.wix.com</a></td>
<td>Platform to create a classroom website</td>
<td>Offers multimodal options, Increases accessibility of materials, Curates perspectives for students to share with their world</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tumblr</td>
<td><a href="https://www.tumblr.com">https://www.tumblr.com</a></td>
<td>Social media platform</td>
<td>Offers multimodal options, Promotes the sharing of information, Makes it possible for students to communicate with global audience</td>
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<td>Meme Generator</td>
<td><a href="https://memegenerator.net/">https://memegenerator.net/</a></td>
<td>Platform to create memes</td>
<td>Guides students to construct message about issue of importance, Offers multimodal options, Makes student the producer of knowledge</td>
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<td>VoiceThread</td>
<td><a href="https://voicethread.com/">https://voicethread.com/</a></td>
<td>App/Platform to create and share multimedia</td>
<td>Guides students to construct message about issues of importance, Offers multimodal options, Makes student the producer of knowledge, Promotes the sharing of information, Makes it possible for students to communicate with global audience</td>
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<td>Glogster</td>
<td><a href="https://www.glogster.com">https://www.glogster.com</a></td>
<td>App/Platform to create and share digital posters with multimedia</td>
<td>Guides students to curate magazine on any topic, Offers multimodal options, Makes student the producer of knowledge, Promotes the sharing of information, Makes it possible for students to communicate with global audience</td>
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<td>Flipboard</td>
<td><a href="https://flipboard.com/">https://flipboard.com/</a></td>
<td>App/Platform for organizing news outlets or magazines as well as curate a magazine about any topic</td>
<td>Helps students to curate magazine on any topic, Allows for differentiation (readability of articles), Allows students to add to the magazine</td>
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modalities. Students also worked in small groups using Glogster to document literature circle discussions. Upon reading historical fiction books about topics such as School Segregation, Migrant Labor, Black Panthers, and Freedom Summer, the students critically analyzed texts through multiple modes: spoken audio, music, placement of images, individual reflections through print, selection of quotes, and hyperlinks to connected issues (both locally and globally). This project showcased perspectives about a variety of topics and was illustrative of the choices students made as multimodal learners.

**Becoming Agents of Change**

Student inquiry about social justice topics anchors the curriculum and invites students to see themselves as action-oriented thinkers. We use the term inquiry to denote learners who raise questions about everything all the time without regard to finding the “right answer.” For us, becoming a social justice inquirer means creating a process for promoting intellectualism and advocacy that helps students recognize their ability to pursue their interests and nurture their curiosity about an issue of importance in their life. The students’ inquiries were developed through a collaborative process during community meetings that involved brainstorming issues they wanted to address, gathering information from multiple sources to learn more about how the issue affects different groups of people, sharing information as they learn about it, and then deciding how to make their learning public.

The collaborative inquiry process, which was facilitated by digital tools such as Google docs, Padlet, Corkulous, and Answer Garden, allowed the students to support each other, share resources, understand their roles in relation to social justice issues, and build a collective understanding about different topics that foreground their concerns and perspectives. For instance, when students were interested in the progression of poverty and crime in their community, they used digital media and tools to guide their inquiry. Using their tablets, we asked them to share their thoughts about this topic on Answer Garden. This platform provided space for the students to see everyone’s thoughts and to generate additional ideas about the intersection of class, race, and crime.

Next, we watched the documentary *Park Avenue*, which explores the social construction of class in their neighborhood compared to a wealthier area of town by traveling down Park Avenue. Students followed this viewing by sharing images and notes on Google Docs with their classmates. To continue building background knowledge and exploring their collective questions, they read articles curated in a magazine on Flipboard. As a way to begin crafting a counter-story while speaking to issues of race, class, and crime in their community, they created memes using Meme Generator. We incorporated Answer-Garden to help them brainstorm ideas and organize this data in a digital space. Later, they would rely on this information during whole-group discussions that took place in Socratic seminars and fishbowls to generate ideas about how to get involved in solution-oriented actions. We centered digital tools to cultivate this process and support a participatory culture of advocacy.

In the classroom, students used various apps, platforms, and software to explore questions and ideas connected to social justice initiatives. Linking real-world social issues with digital tools has fostered a community of learners: a) who care about the world around them; b) who want to learn how others with similar interests are addressing these issues; and c) who instigate change in digital spaces to impact micro and macro community issues.

When student inquiry was the catalyst for curriculum design, we observed that students were not trying to find one right answer; rather, they were reading, writing, and researching a topic to better understand how inequity impacts our society. The process of creating collaborative social justice inquiries with digital tools required each student to process multiple streams of data, make decisions about its usefulness in their argument, and make connections to other information presented by peers. Throughout these learning experiences,
students were positioned as competent and capable of managing their interests, time, and learning.

Leveraging Digital Tools for Social Justice: Three Recommendations

Teaching in the 21st century under heightened professional scrutiny and excessive standardized testing can be challenging and stressful. Through this project, we learned that digital tools can support students’ pursuit of knowledge and help them to be better problem solvers and critical thinkers. Digital tools created space for students to curate the messages they wanted to convey about social issues. We had to continually figure out ways to address the Common Core State Standards, honor the students’ investment in social issues and technology, and create lessons that supported the students as they fluidly moved among different genres of writing and digital tools. We acknowledge that our work is highly contextual and not replicable in every classroom. Therefore, we have three recommendations for teachers who are interested in centering digital literacies as a way of learning about social justice issues.

1. Communicate with stakeholders: We recommend initiating conversations with as many stakeholders as possible about your interest in developing a curriculum that integrates digital tools. By stakeholders, we mean students, building administrators, technology specialists, PTA/PTO members, school board members, families, Congressional representatives, and community organizations. The purpose of these conversations is to share your vision about how digital tools could support student learning and to seek support in the form of resources and/or expertise.

2. Focus on the process: Frequently, digital tools are seen as an add-on to the curriculum or a means to share a final product. We recommend thinking about integrating digital tools as a way of knowing and processing content. We understand that learners need access to many modalities and platforms to make sense of what they are learning, and digital tools open up spaces for more students to demonstrate how they are making sense of curricular objectives, not just what they learned at the end of the unit.

3. Try one tool at a time: We understand in this sociopolitical context that everyone is teaching with a variety of constraints. If you are in a district or building where you use a pacing guide or have to follow a more prescriptive curriculum, there is always space to include a digital tool that you can integrate into your lesson plan to foster problem posing and/or problem solving, collaboration, and creativity. We recommend that you think about learning tools broadly enough to include digital tools as options. For example, if you use reading response journals as a way to have students share their thinking about their independent reading book or a read-aloud you are doing in class, you can easily adapt that practice to use Google Docs, Evernote, or Notability. Each of these options allows students to share their thinking across modalities by including images, voice, and text.

We recognize that when students have choice, layered with space for social justice inquiry and collaboration through digital tools, the curriculum becomes more inviting and grounded in their lived experiences. Leveraging students’ knowledge of technology with digital tools is a stance that promotes engagement, wonder, and exploration.

For Further Reading

Critical Digital Literacies as Social Praxis: Intersections and Challenges

This edited book addresses topics related to digital storytelling, social media, critical medial literacies, and creating agents of social change. Critical digital literacies is the theoretical framework that unites the ideas presented in each chapter, spanning elementary to higher education. Across this edited volume,
literacy researchers share how students engage with digital tools and media to explore issues of identity, student agency, access, and purpose.

**References**


**Amplify: Digital Teaching and Learning in the K–6 Classroom**


Muhtaris and Ziemke provide a wealth of information on incorporating digital tools into literacy curriculum. The authors provide practical suggestions and classroom examples to guide teachers into the world of digital learning. Each chapter shares ideas about blending digital tools into your daily routine and includes images of real classroom work and questions to guide your decision making.

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