"In that system, we all look like thieves": Developing Young People's Critical Digital Citizenship

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Introduction

Although technology companies increasingly creep into our lives (Zuboff, 2019), students rarely have opportunities in school to grapple with the ramifications. *Digital citizenship* curricula could be the exception, but they typically emphasize personal safety and respectful behavior online, ignoring more participatory or justice-oriented notions of citizenship (Krutka & Carpenter, 2017; Heath, 2018; Jones & Mitchell, 2016; Ribble, Bailey, & Ross, 2004). Consequently, approaches to digital citizenship which only promote reputation management or online netiquette serve to sustain, rather than challenge, oppressive social structures (Chapman & Greenhow, 2021).

We consider possibilities for technology education in the preparation of youth as civic actors. Because technology is not neutral (Krutka, Heath, & Mason, 2020; Benjamin, 2019; Noble, 2018), it influences civic engagement, sometimes in undertheorized ways. Further, civic education pedagogies often minimize student agency (Chapman, 2019). Therefore, we argue for a critical lens to understand technology and civic participation.

From Digital Citizenship to Critical Digital Citizenship

Scholars have called for other conceptualizations of digital citizenship, including new ways of civic expression, such as using social media to bypass traditional approaches to civic engagement and as a means of critical civic resistance (Choi, 2016; Kane, Ng-A-Fook, Radford, & Butler, 2016). In addition, Black women in particular have confronted biases in emerging digital technologies (Benjamin, 2019; Buolamwini & Gebru, 2018; Kentayya, 2020; Noble, 2018). We seek to join these two lines of scholarship and build a more expansive definition of digital citizenship grounded in critical theory and pedagogy.

We argue that envisioning digital citizenship through a critical lens should be influenced by the work on critical pedagogy (Freire, 1973, 74). Critical pedagogy helps challenge the status

quo to achieve social justice, by collectively raising consciousness of systemic barriers that promote oppression in order to achieve liberation. Critical pedagogy encourages us to understand how systems and hierarchies of power operate to undervalue the lived experiences, knowledge, language, and culture of historically disenfranchised communities.

Critical pedagogy offers ways youth can combat asymmetric power structures (Freire, 1972, 74; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Youth engagement in active, participatory citizenship through digital media should enable them to express their personal politics and promote civic engagement through different forms of digital interactions. In social studies education, Black, Indigenous, and scholars of Color in particular have applied critical theory to critique systems of oppression and power in relation to citizenship (Busey & Dowie-Chin, 2021; Crowley & King, 2018; Johnson, 2019; Rodríguez, 2018; Vickery, 2017; Sabzalian, 2019).

Critical digital citizenship curricula are therefore a means for educators and students to use technology and interrogate it in order to effect systemic change (Garcia & de Roock, 2021; Mirra & Garcia, 2020). Based in critical pedagogy, the Young People's Race, Power, and Technology (YPRPT) Project is an example of youth civic expression, one that can help educators and scholars reconsider critical digital citizenship.

The Young People's Race, Power and Technology Project

YPRPT is an out-of-school initiative in a large Midwest city that uses a research-based curriculum to empower high school-aged youth, mostly from historically marginalized groups, to explore, critique, and reimagine technology (TREE Lab, n.d.). The program integrates technology "under the hood" investigations with social justice topics, documentary filmmaking, and relationship building among participants. The first iteration of YPRPT occurred both in person and virtually during the 2019-2020 school year; the second iteration was completely

virtual during the 2020-2021 school year. Teams joined from local high schools, community-based organizations, and faith-based groups. After completing a 19-week curriculum, each team produced a short documentary film about a technology-related issue of their choosing.

Findings from the Young People's Race, Power, and Technology Project

YPRPT uses critical theory to understand how digital citizenship empowers youth to transcend the socially placed constraints of race and class (Creswell, 2007). A thematic analysis of the student-produced YPRPT films suggests youth are developing critical digital citizenship.

In the first iteration of YPRPT, students made films about the Chicago Police Department's flawed gang database; facial recognition technology; and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's use of technology to surveil and deport undocumented people. The three films share a common theme: seemingly neutral technologies, such as databases, can be weaponized to control and punish nondominant communities.

In the second iteration of YPRPT, which expanded the number of participating groups from three to 13, students created films on subjects such as AI in healthcare; shadowbanning on TikTok; and problems as well as the possibilities of automation. A documentary about facial recognition technology titled *Let's Face It: Privacy Matters* (Team Family Matters, 2021) opens with a Black student rapping, "Facial recognition technology, it's just killing me. It never finds the right identity. Maybe not to you, but to people of color. It uses imagery, and in that system we all look like thieves typically." This student identified facial recognition technology's racialized bias, systemic injustice, and the criminalization of Black people (Buolamwini & Gebru, 2018; Kentayya, 2020). In addressing the ways race, power, and technology intersect, the student appears to be developing critical digital citizenship.

Having made the argument that "Even the smartest technology can be ignorant," the student then joins several peers to examine the ethics of facial recognition technology. The group of youth focus their discussion on the January 6th riots. They pose the question: if the police used facial recognition technology to identify and apprehend some of the Capitol rioters, then, in one student's words, the technology "can't be that bad, right?" Through peer-to-peer discussion and an extended interview with a local privacy researcher, the students conclude facial recognition technology requires regulation. "Privacy matters," says one student. Another student agrees: "Yeah, you're right. Privacy *does* matter."

The students' discussion is evidence of their growing political consciousness, what Freire called conscientization. Together, the students pose questions, explore possible answers, and arrive at a more nuanced, critical understanding of a powerful and increasingly ubiquitous technology. Both the student's rap and the subsequent film showcase how the YPRPT curriculum–with its emphasis on critical digital citizenship and justice-oriented notions of citizenship–encouraged students to respond to knotty questions of civics and technology with ideas that seek broad systemic change at institutional levels rather than narrow individual changes in a single person's behavior.

Conclusion

Traditional digital citizenship curricula struggle to address complex social problems. We propose critical digital citizenship as a way to achieve more just relationships between technology, democracy, and our lives. YPRPT exemplifies one learning experience designed to foster students' critical digital citizenship and encourage them to cultivate justice-oriented civic identities.

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