TALES FROM THE FIELD: SO, WHO GETS TO BE DIGITALLY LITERATE?

Sarah Haroon Sualehi[1]

ABSTRACT: Digital literacy is globally recognized as being a key determinant of economic, social, and political mobility. However, access to digital tools and opportunities for upskilling are infrequently provided to vulnerable adults from the Global South. Through a social justice lens, this paper uses a critical personal narrative approach to explore how a legacy of colonization, neoliberalism, and globalization shapes inequitable access to digital literacy for adult learners within the Global South, specifically Pakistan. This reflective memo frames the author's experiences as an international adult education scholar-practitioner within and from the Global South and explores the ways that histories of power manifest at the periphery. In doing so, the author explores how southern individuals, scholars, and practitioners are often kept at the periphery of decision-making, sense-making, or sense-giving within the adult education and lifelong learning field. The paper considers the inequity hidden within the provision of many adult education and vocational training programs, particularly as it relates to digital literacy development, through three stages of reflection on themes related to 1) decision-making: colonial occupation versus colonial narratives; 2) sense-making: the economic habitus of service and servitude; and 3) sense-giving: Pakistan's pathway to digital literacy. While most adult education providers focus on reinforcing opportunities offered to learners, equally important to consider is what opportunities are tacitly withheld from learners and the assumptions that undergird those decisions. Finally, the author suggests how adult educators can support the digital liberation of adult learners from historically oppressed communities through a series of interlocking reflection questions.

Keywords: digital literacy, Global South, adult education

ساقی ہے ذرخیز بڑی مٹی یہ تو و ہو نم ذرا

"With just a little moisture, this too is fertile land, my love."

- Pakistani poet, Allama Iqbal, on the extraordinary potential within us all

At the nexus of power and opportunity, digital literacy can determine an individual's access to social connectivity, economic mobility, and political participation in the 21st century. Policymakers, program leaders, and adult educators recognize the irrefutable importance of digital skills as universal mobilizers. For instance, the United Nations included digital literacy as a critical component within the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals, catalyzing governments around the world to pour funding into internal digital skills trainings and improving national telecommunications infrastructures.

At its core, the inequitable provision of digital literacy is also a lever of social injustice, oppression, and division: those with it can extract its benefit, but those without it are left further behind. When access to digital skills training or technology infrastructure is not equitably provided to adults from historically marginalized communities, this gap is felt even more acutely. With automation integrated into key aspects of our political, economic, and social beings, analog communities without basic or sustainable digital

[1] Texas A&M University, sarah.sualehi@tamu.edu

literacy face a bleak future. Using a practitioner-driven social justice lens, this paper leverages a critical personal narrative approach to explore how a legacy of colonization, neoliberalism, and globalization can shape inequitable access to digital literacy programs for adult learners within the Global South. Additionally, it suggests how adult educators can support the digital liberation of adult learners from historically oppressed communities.

Literature Review

Digital literacy is a foundational skillset for countries seeking to develop a modern knowledge economy. Literature outlines central concepts and outcomes of digital literacy, clarification of the digital literacy divide, and barriers to its adoption. Though a relatively new field emerging in the 1990s, the link between digital literacy, social justice, and globalization has already been conceptualized as critical digital literacy. It is vital to recognize that most digital literacy scholarship is voiced from the seat of the Global North.

Digital literacy refers to a set of skills that allows users to connect with social, economic, and political power in more fluid ways. Socially, digital literacy allows members of a community to connect despite physical barriers (Jimoyiannis & Gravani, 2011). Economically, digital literacy allows users to transition to high-growth industries, such as tech and healthcare, to gain financial independence (Mohammadyari & Singh, 2015). Politically, digital literacy allows users to connect with key public services and apply for benefits without cost-related barriers such as transport, income-loss, or childcare (Vanek, 2017). Digital literacy is also conceptualized as two distinct phases. The first digital divide refers to access, recognizing that an individual's digital literacy is based on their ability to first have access to digital tools such as hardware, software, or internet (Barrie et al, 2021). This gap is usually closed through resource enrichment and infrastructure interventions. The second digital divide refers to usage and application (Tsai et al, 2015). Even if access is provided, vulnerable adults need equitable capacity-building opportunities to develop the skills necessary to properly leverage the digital tools and services now available to them.

Critical digital literacy posits that digital literacy can become a gatekeeping tool to keep certain communities away from political, economic, and social mobility (Pangrazio, 2016; Hinrichsen & Coombs, 2014). Scholars have studied this phenomenon through analyses on internet diffusion (Crenshaw, 2006); income inequality (Ndoya & Asongu, 2022); access to digital capital (Calderon, 2021); and key drivers of the global digital divide (Cruz-Jesus et al, 2018). Within a country, historically marginalized communities usually experience this gap. For instance, a recent Tribal Tech Assessment revealed that Native Americans are one of the most under-served and under-connected communities in the US (Howard & Morris, 2019). At a global level, digital literacy widens the gap between the Global North and the Global South, further reinforced through histories of power. In its most recent report, the UN agency International Telecommunication Union found that an estimated 37% of the world has never used the internet before, and of this, 96% of disconnected communities are in developing countries within the Global South (Bogdan-Martin, 2021, pg. iii). While many note that digital divides are felt more

strongly by countries forced into economic roles reinforced by colonization, globalization, or neoliberal policies, little is said about the role of adult educators in helping this digital divide either close, persist, or widen.

Method

Within the larger body of qualitative methodologies, personal narratives fall within the purview of autoethnography. Merging aesthetic, analytic, and evaluative skills, autoethnographies seek to explore personal experiences within and through a cultural experience (Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). As the methodology has developed, it has created parallel streams of evocative and analytic approaches based on the researcher's stance (Anderson, 2006; Ellis, 2004). At its core, autoethnographies leverage a storytelling technique which rejects a narrator's neutrality or objectivity and instead reorients them as subjective, emotional, and reflexive participants in the research process and product (Ellis, 2011). These writings are often grounded in a series of confessions or epiphanies that occur from the narrator's experience.

Personal narratives are considered the "most controversial form of autoethnography for traditional social scientists" as they represent a significant departure from entrenched forms of analysis found most often in Western academia (Ellis, 2011, p. 279). However, the personal narrative is not just a form of evocative academic rebellion: it allows authors to reflect on their lives by inviting the reader into their cultural praxis. For most Indigenous, eastern, and southern epistemologies, storytelling is a critical method of information sharing, reflection, analysis, and preservation. Stories can traverse the borders of epistemic, ontological, and axiomatic constructions to assist in the holistic sense-making of the world around us (Chapman, 2004). Critical narratives seek to challenge power and the oppression of marginalized bodies, while a personal narrative represents personal findings on issues of inquiry (Chapman, 2004; Sun & Roumell, 2017).

As a brown, Muslim woman from Pakistan, I develop this reflective memo using the critical personal narrative approach to contemplate my experiences as an international adult education scholar-practitioner within and from the Global South and explore the ways that histories of power manifest at the periphery. I make this initial attempt to create a moment of shared understanding between myself and the reader to trigger a series of deeper reflections on our practice as members of the international adult education community.

Personal Reflections from the Periphery

Throughout my years as an educator from 2011 to 2023, whether working in the adult education, K-12, government, or nonprofit space, I was consistently exposed to a series of repetitive tropes which cut across my roles as a curriculum developer, teacher trainer, program manager, researcher, or student. Many of these narratives echoed Global North histories of power stemming from colonial, neoliberal, or globalized perspectives. However, my Global South origins in a space often dominated by pedagogies, andragogies, and epistemologies of the Global North often kept me - and bodies like

mine - at the periphery of decision-making, sense-making, or sense-giving. By reflecting on my practice, I endeavor to explore the inequity hidden within the provision of many adult education and vocational training programs, particularly as it relates to digital literacy development. While most adult education providers focus on reinforcing opportunities offered to learners, equally important to consider is what opportunities are tacitly withheld from learners and the assumptions that undergird those decisions.

Decision-Making: Colonial Occupation vs Colonial Narratives

During a networking breakfast at a post-pandemic global conference, I met an attendee from the US working in Latin America. After an initial exchange, we broached the "So what do you do?" question, wherein I explained my work within workforce development, adult education, and the impact of digital literacy on occupational and social mobility for vulnerable learners. Though engaged, this woman paused and said, "That sounds great, but it would *never* work in the country I'm in right now. The women just wouldn't go for complex digital skills." Puzzled, I shared that one of the organizations I used to work for does this exact type of high-skills digital literacy training in the very country she was speaking of, pulling up their website and annual report metrics. Unconvinced, she shrugged me off with a bland "it's just not for them."

I have thought about this networking breakfast for entirely too much time. As I struggled to unpack my frustration with this conversation and attendee, I realized that most of my annoyance was rooted in two strands. First was this woman's conviction that a *whole country* of female adult learners would somehow be incapable or disinterested in learning complex digital skills. Second was her implied belief that her opinion of an entire nation somehow superseded evidence of grassroots trainings or metrics from the field. I was disappointed because I recognized that her attitude echoed the tired tropes embodied in colonial deficit narratives of Indigenous ability, made more poignant by the fact that she was from the Global North, while this Latin American country and I are firmly rooted in post-colonial countries of the Global South. More than just a physical process of economic oppression and slave-labor practices, colonization was also a social and cognitive takeover of a community's consciousness. To control local bodies while ensuring basic skillsets were available to ensure economic production, colonial education structures were constructed to be strategic and brutal interventions to unlearn Indigenous communal knowledge and histories of power. Education was limited to basic literacy and numeracy to ensure that Indigenous individuals could support the continuous running of the colonial machine, while touting the inherently bigoted belief that these communities could never amount to anything more than just the basics. This in turn created a colonial deficit narrative regarding the perceived limitations of Indigenous communities as being primitive.

While most colonial occupations may have ended, colonial narratives describing southern communities have not. I have often wondered how many adult education opportunities are withheld from vulnerable southern communities in part due to the language of deficit used at the center of decision-making to describe us at the periphery. It is all too common to hear adult educators in seats of power withhold training opportunities from learners due to a "lack of market fit", misalignment with "employer expectations", or learning

being "out of scope", suggesting that the economic machine that adult learners are being fed into takes precedence to their humanistic needs, goals, or interests. As Julia Preece famously shared, adult education, when voiced solely from the seat of the Global North, can reinforce colonial narratives of "basic education only" interventions within the Global South (2009). Unless members of the Global South are invited into the decision-making and design of adult education for their communities, we will continue to see a misalignment in the Global North's beliefs about the ability of southern bodies and the Global South's need to articulate a vision of success based on internal epistemologies of education and lifelong learning that embrace the indigenous values, histories, and counter-stories of their people without the neocolonial insertion of Global North values, needs, and agendas.

Sense-Making: The Economic Habitus of Service and Servitude

When I look back on twelve years of my work across the world through a social justice lens, I am faced with the unique difference in the distribution of digital versus analog curricula. At its core, adult education seeks to provide economic and social mobility to vulnerable adults. When I would collaborate with partners in the Global North, adult education programs centered on high-growth industries including technology, healthcare, and disability services. Often, these programs were withheld from southern communities as learning contrasted with a country's expected modes of production upheld through inequitable policies and relationships. These systems frequently came together to reinforce an economic habitus focused on service and servitude within the Global South, limiting individuals to certain systems of being (Bourdieu, 1989). Echoing Manuel Castells, "exclusion from these [technology/internet] networks are one of the most damaging forms of exclusion in our economy and in our culture" (2002, p. 3). When the "global" push for digital literacy is tempered with the fact that most disconnected individuals are in the Global South, we must ask ourselves: if digital literacy, from access to upskilling, is withheld from a disproportionate percentage of southern communities, is adult education reinforcing an analog habitus? How are adult learners from these communities meant to make sense of their identities as learners, workers, and individuals in the 21st century when subjected to systems which disconnect and dispossess them?

My experiences with adult education programs in Global North countries such as Australia and Singapore have run opposite to my experiences with adult education in the Global South. For instance, since 2015 the Australian Digital Inclusion Index has published reports and dashboards to track metrics related to performance, accessibility, and the closure of the digital divide for vulnerable groups, especially Indigenous, disabled, or elder Australians. Similarly, Singapore created its Digital Readiness Programme Office in 2017 leading to the establishment of the "Skills Future Initiative" and "Seniors Go Digital" government-backed programs to improve digital literacy for all. Across years of working with these countries, most programs I supported were consciously aligned with government policies and social expectations of success for all. Whether adult education partners were international, domestic, public, or private, there was a firm commitment to the creation of a knowledge economy where everyone must be able to join, including Indigenous adults, elders, refugees, new arrivals, single parents, and more. Even with saturated markets, most local partners felt that job availability

should not be the only driving force for adult education: some skills, such as digital literacy, were simply necessary in the 21st century.

However, the same is not the case for adult education within many developing countries. In my experience within the Global South, most adult education providers were much more likely to offer programs for labor-intensive or service-driven roles. Adult education often reinforced analog industries limiting the creation of or participation in a knowledge economy. This was the case even if southern countries had internal policies and external funders supporting digital literacy. For instance, around the same time as Australia and Singapore, Pakistan launched the Digital Pakistan Initiative in 2019 to increase digital inclusion via improved internet accessibility and workforce upskilling. However, most adult education partners such as USAID, the World Bank, or private providers, mostly offered programs for positions as factory workers, agricultural labor, or call center assistants. Unlike commitments in Australia or Singapore, there was no reinforced belief in digital literacy, the creation of the knowledge economy, or an equitable distribution of digital skills. There was no desire to deliver programs in line with government policy to support socioeconomic mobility. Adult education largely focused on service and servitude driven occupational pathways irrespective of digital policies.

Sense-Giving: Pakistan's Pathway to Digital Literacy

While testing a digital literacy platform, some older, Hispanic adult learners my team worked with were concerned about next steps. Our guided program modules focused on basic digital skills, while participants were interested in more complex skills related to document creation and data analysis. Due to limitations in capacity and funding, we could not join them for the entire learning journey but shared that advanced modules were available if they independently continued the program. Many learners committed to completing the modules themselves, with one older participant progressing to advanced modules within a month. While there was no compulsion for these older learners to seek out advanced digital skills, there is power in a community's ability to re-narrativize their pathway to digital literacy through an emancipatory sense-giving process which allows them to influence their futures. Similarly, a closer look at the systems of power impacting a country such as Pakistan can illustrate how communities in the Global South can reclaim their decision-making, sense-making, and sense-giving processes in the face of exclusionary deficit narratives.

Pakistan was part of the British Crown's colonizing campaign of South Asia from 1760 to 1947, used for its fertile grounds, mineral wealth, and manual labor. Even after gaining its independence in 1947, Pakistan's main economic industries still mirror these colonial sectors reinforced by patterns of globalization and neoliberalism. In many ways, globalization supports neo-colonial structures necessary for knowledge-based economies to preserve power along production and consumption lines. The Global South's attempted transition from exploitative manual labor to knowledge-based economies could potentially upset production and supply chains that the Global North depends on to maintain the hegemony of their lived experiences. For instance, as a country currently facing a food and hunger crisis, Pakistan ironically still exports food to countries such as the US, China, Saudi Arabia, and the Netherlands (Global Hunger Index, 2022; Mercy

Corps, 2022; WITS, 2022). Transitioning to a digitally literate knowledge economy would disrupt food supplies to powerful nations. Furthermore, neoliberalism has resulted in decreased spending on public goods such as adult education and vocational training leaving behind a vacuum for third-party providers to fill. However, many externally funded interventions align first with the interests of donors, then to the organization's mission, and finally to beneficiary need. For example, most World Bank and USAID interventions historically run in Pakistan have focused on basic education, rural development, agricultural innovation, or manufacturing skills (USAID, 2022; World Bank, 2022). In many ways, these programs mirror the scope of colonial education interventions: externally funded programs primarily improve the quality of exports from Pakistan to its donors. As these programs increase outputs for trade while leaving behind a starving citizenry, many adult education programs seem to reshape Pakistan's economy to first benefit Global North interests embedded in trade agreements over its learners.

Similar to the learners testing the digital literacy platform, these narratives shift when Pakistan controls its own digital literacy development. After establishing a sustainable telecommunications industry, Pakistan slowly began transitioning to a knowledge economy. First, it increased its internet and fiber optics infrastructure. From 2001 to 2021, national internet usage grew from 1.3% to 54% due to aggressive expansion policies (The Express Tribune, 2021). In addition to expanded access, the government increased usage through skills training. In 2018, DigiSkills Pakistan was created to provide adults with digital skills training to be better prepared for a digital future of work with courses in freelancing, graphic design, digital marketing, basic digital literacy and more. Since 2018, it has delivered more than three million trainings and counting (DigiSkills, 2022). Additionally, in 2019, the government launched the Digital Pakistan Initiative after years of effort and ad hoc external support. Eventually, international institutions became key partners, with the World Bank joining DPI in 2019; the Asian Development Bank in 2020; USAID in 2021; and DFiD in 2022. By recentering their control of decision-making, sense-making, and sense-giving processes, Pakistan – like other countries in the Global South – is taking demonstrable steps to influence narratives of adult education, learner perception, and pathways to digital literacy.

Looking Forward

Some adult educators will never stop using deficit-embedded language steeped in colonial narratives to describe learners in and from the Global South, particularly regarding digital literacy development. To change this, adult educators must reflect on their voice and expertise to recognize the crucial opportunity we have in providing socially just curricula and programs through our interventions. As I continue this work, I invite like-minded adult educators to join me by first reflecting on three interlocking questions.

> *1. What language do you use to describe your stakeholders and programs?* Some adult education providers describe stakeholders and skills-building programs for vulnerable communities using deficit-driven language regarding a learner's interest, ability, or scope. We must reflect on the language we use to describe the

individuals we support and consider how colonial narratives shape our vocabulary.

2. How basic are your programs? If we consistently limit our offerings to "basic level only", we risk reducing learners to colonial tropes used for control. We must advocate for equitable opportunity and access to a variety of multilevel learning content instead of reinforcing stereotypes that compartmentalize our learners. We must consider whether we are truly responding to learner needs or unconsciously upholding inequity through our work.

3. Who do your adult education programs truly serve? Many adult education programs serve donor or funder needs before learners. Programs that first serve donors dehumanize adult learners as the scope of their potential is not fully recognized or realized. For a socially just approach to adult education, our programs should answer to the needs and potential of adult learners first.

In the 21st century, digital literacy is a critical driver for countries to transition towards a knowledge-based economy. While this is universally recognized through the UN Sustainable Development Goals, access and capacity building is not being equitably provided. Through conscious change, adult education can alter unjust historical structures resulting from globalization, neoliberalism, and colonization. By questioning the assumptions and biases driving our work, we can leverage our expertise to advocate for learning opportunities that support vulnerable adults from the Global South in realizing their true potential by shifting the decision-making, sense-making, and sense-giving processes from the center to historically marginalized communities at the peripheries of our work.

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