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Forum: Online Learning, Technology Integration, and Digital Literacy

(Part 2 of 3)

Beyond Crisis, Toward Justice: New Technologies in Community-Based Adult Learning

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In the disorienting early days of the pandemic, educators and learners in adult literacy, basic education and English Language Learning programs accomplished a rapid shift to "crisis remote teaching" to accommodate physical distancing mandates and lockdowns. The flurry of studies documenting these "pandemic pedagogies" (Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education, 2020) suggest that educators and learners alike were surprised at how quickly they were able to incorporate new digital pedagogies (Belzer et al., 2020; Smythe et al., 2021). As Vanek argues in her forum piece *Supporting Quality Instruction: Building Teacher Capacity as Instructional Designers*, this was an important accomplishment given that, in most community-based settings, in-person pedagogies predominated prior to the pandemic. Writing from Canada in the fall of 2021, community-based programs continue to navigate competing desires for social connection and pedagogical advantages of in-person learning, as well as the convenience and "COVID-safe" nature of synchronous and asynchronous online learning. How might the community-based adult education field harness the pandemic experience to inform technology integration moving forward? What principles should guide such decisions? Vanek takes up these vital questions, as she encourages the "structured use of technology integration frameworks and strategies" to support educators to make effective decisions about technology integration and online learning.

In this response, I join Vanek in imagining the role of new technologies in community-based education as we settle into a "new normal." I build upon and extend Vanek's suggestions by drawing upon research and practice oriented to digital justice. Digital justice is at once a set of principles, a pedagogy and a movement (Allied Media, 2020; Detroit Digital Justice Coalition (DDJC, 2021) toward fair and ethical digital and social futures. Proponents of digital justice leverage critical digital literacies and online activism to subvert and expose technologies that are implicated in online harms such as surveillance, discrimination, and social exclusion. Movements such as the DDJC (2021) have generated principles and practices toward accessibility, equity and participatory decision making in digital ecosystems.

To anchor this conversation, I first describe my experiences as an adult literacy researcher in Canada, working closely with community-based educators and researchers to map new pedagogies, as well as fissures of digital inequality, that have deepened during the pandemic. I then consider how concepts of digital equity and digital justice

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may help us to think through the benefits and problematics of technology integration in adult and community-based education. Here, the politics of technologies are central, as is how we mobilize concepts such as "distance" and "in-person," learning. I conclude by adding to Vanek's questions and principles new considerations for technology integration toward the digital/worlds we want.

Pandemic Pedagogies and Technology Integration

In April 2020, the Canadian Association for Studies in Adult Education launched a webinar series to capture adult education practices during the pandemic. They called the series *pandemic pedagogies*, noting,

> Adult educators across Canada are doing extraordinary things to deal with a multitude of issues associated with COVID-19: home/social isolation, (health) literacy, trauma and stress, poverty and unemployment, racism, changing means of communication and work, just to name a few. (Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education, 2020, para. 1)

This inspired statement led us to inquire more deeply into pandemic pedagogies in British Columbia, Canada (Smythe et al., 2021), with a particular interest in how educators were using digital technologies to adapt to physical distancing rules and lockdowns during the first and second waves. We were surprised that participants first and foremost told stories of the changing power relations surrounding their work during the pandemic, and then went on to describe new digital pedagogies. Perhaps this was so because digital technologies are not an add on; they are embedded in these social and political relationships (Bayne et al., 2020; de Roock, 2021). We held 30-45 minute interviews with 24 community-based educators and outreach workers who described to us in-the-moment inventions and adaptations that were remarkably similar to those described in Belzer et al.'s (2001) review of new pedagogies of COVID-19. The educators surveyed in their study reported a range of pedagogies, some technology-mediated and some not, such as providing flexibility for learners in how and when they completed their work, more diverse, just-in-time methods for learners and educators to communicate with one another, novel uses of social media to post learner assignments and provide feedback, as well as new ways to gage learner "time on task" and to "capture learner contact hours" (2021, p. 2).

In our study in British Columbia, Canada, educators similarly reported a constellation of strategies drawing upon old and new technologies: phone and home visits to check on learners' well-being; creating and delivering print-based learning materials to homes, food security hubs and other meeting places; setting up Wi-Fi hot spots in parking lots to help people complete their (mostly online only) emergency income applications; creating just-in-time tutorials via WhatsApp chats for using Zoom for ESL classes, some of which transformed into rollicking, multilngual, cross-border cooking and dance classes.

Amidst the crisis was the sense that a profound pedagogical transformation was underway, not only because educators and learners were using technologies in new ways, but because usual relations of power were shifting. Educators and outreach workers noted that the responsive, just-in-time and experimental approaches they were adopting animated an "ethic of care" (Ba, 2020) and relationships of "social solidarity" (Smythe et al., 2021) that they said subverted client-provider, learner-instructor, and novice-expert hierarchies that had come to define their programs before the pandemic. Educators and learners navigated new Zoom/MS Teams platforms together and collaborated to address many other unprecedented challenges, such as applying for online for

emergency income benefits. Racialized learners and learners who identify as LGBTQ2S+ said they could exercise their sovereignty to join an online class in which anti-racist, gender inclusive pedagogies prevailed, rather than settle for an unsafe class that was physically close by. Recognizing the value of their local knowledge and multilingual capacities, administrators accorded front-line educators and outreach workers more power to make decisions about how programs should be run.

Although the pandemic moment opened new possibilities and new relationships, it was also very clear to these educators that the social and economic effects of the pandemic intensified suffering and hardship among communities that already experience systemic racism, transphobia, gender discrimination and oppressive labour conditions. As Gangadharan (2017) has observed, income, race and gender inequalities reinforce and entrench digital inequalities.

For example, in Canada, equitable access to technologies is a matter for markets to decide, hence access to crisis remote learning was dependent on learners' access to a privatized internet that is unaffordable to many. Adult literacy and ESL educators in our research study reported that they lost about 20% of their students due to connectivity issues, and because "some families just can't manage it" (Smythe et al., 2020, p. 23). Just as Belzer et al. (2020) described, many learners thrived and learned new digital literacy skills as they connected to their educators and classes, but others who were more digitally excluded fell away. Women were less likely to have access to devices as these were often distributed to children or their male partners first.

This is but one account of the pandemic within community-based adult education programs and time will tell what the transformational potential of this moment becomes. However, as Vanek demonstrates, the experience opens up complex questions about the role of technology integration in community-based adult literacy settings, and I take up some of these in what follows.

A Closer Look at Technology in Integration

What do we mean by technology integration? Phone calls and photo-copied lessons dropped to people's homes leveraged older technologies that were mobilized in new ways. Social media networks and messaging systems, often repressed in classroom environments pre-pandemic, took on new importance as an engine for information sharing. Video conferencing platforms such as MS Teams and Zoom were not necessarily new but found new purpose in making learning possible when physical distancing became necessary. These approaches weave pedagogies in ways that complicate binaries between distance, in-person, synchronous and asynchronous learning.

Although written with post-secondary education in mind, Bayne et al's *Manifesto for Teaching Online*, first published in 2011 and updated in 2016, and in 2021, offers a set of value propositions for teaching online. They advocate rescinding the term "distance learning" in favour of "digital pedagogies," arguing that "distance" is a deficit term that positions what learning is not (e.g., the privileged, in-person mode), and that "distance is temporal, affective, political: not simply spatial" (Bayne et al., 2020, p. 17). What is consequential is not only *where* learners are, but how educators, learners and technologies together can create equitable and productive learning experiences that are responsive to context and learning needs. This informs another of the manifesto propositions that "[T]here are many ways to get it right online. 'Best practice' neglects context" (Bayne et al., 2020, p. 20).

The Politics and Material Force of Technologies

As Vanek argues, educators need support to move through the "what, why, and how for any technology adoption decision." How to support this decision making given the complexities noted above? From digital equity and digital justice perspectives, new technologies are both political and material. New technologies are political because they are usually designed by some people *for* others and reflect the often-hidden interests and desires of these far-off designers (Allied Media, 2021; Golden, 2017). Technologies are material because they have physical properties (keyboards, screen size, light and so on) as well as built-in and often hidden automated and algorithmic properties that affect how we feel, what is possible to do with our bodies, and what kind of learning and social interaction is possible. We often only notice the material properties of new technologies when they behave in unexpected ways. Golden (2017, p, 373) refers to this as the "subscreenic" aspect of technologies: the hidden but important things that machines (and humans) are doing beneath the screen. The politics and material nature of new technologies means that decisions that funders, programs and educators make about using new technologies are also political decisions: Who might be excluded? What are the implications for learners' rights to privacy and consent? What kind of learning is incentivized? What is the scope for educators' professional knowledge and autonomy?

The use of smart phones in community-based education programs is another example of how the politics and material nature of technologies can play out. As Vanek (2021) describes, community-based programs that have moved online during the pandemic have lauded the role of smart phones in bridging gaps in access to the Internet and to devices. Correa et al. (2018) agree that mobile phones offer a gateway to the internet for those excluded from fixed broadband and computer access, and they are a useful tool for social activities and just-in-time communication. However, mobile phones are less suited for education, work and other information-seeking and creation/production activities (Correa et al., 2018, p. 1076). Correa et al. (2018) compared the digital skills of mobile phone and computer (e.g., laptop/desktop) users and found that "mobile-only use does not necessarily lead to a more complete digital inclusion process because it was related to lower levels of skills and less diverse types of uses of the web compared to those people who also use the computer" (p. 1078). The physical properties of devices *matter* in terms of what kinds of writing, learning and interaction are possible for different learners. Following this, educators may need to attend to the devices learners are using, and design and assess learning expectations accordingly. This is a digital justice approach to education that "ensure(s) all members of our community have equal access to media and technology, as producers as well as consumers" (DDJC, 2016, para. 1).

Vanek astutely notes that it is "challenging to disentangle the impact of a particular digital resource or integrated technology on learning, given the multitude of variables at play when evaluating instruction…" (p. 4). As described earlier, some of the variables at play include how technologies are designed and by whom. Williamson (2015) shows that some of the most popular learning management systems and platforms including google docs and proctoring software, are designed by for-profit companies that monitor, measure, and collect information about learners' online behaviours. Not only does this information help to increase profits, the ways that these systems behave also "shape learners'

actions, thoughts, conduct, and subjectivities" (Williamson, 2015, p. 101, in Golden 2017, p. 375). Learners' data and behaviours are therefore monetized, and decisions made about their learning based on machine-generated data has real-world consequences.

Toward Digital Justice

During the COVID-19 pandemic everyday lives and livelihoods of marginalized citizens became even more reliant upon digital technologies, yet these citizens, learners and community members are also more likely to experience biases and inequalities including "misclassifications, over targeting, disqualifications, and flawed predictions" (Gangadharan & Nikras, 2019, p. 882). But far from rejecting the use of digital technologies, adult educators can thoughtfully integrate technologies by considering: Who designs this technology? How could it be used to lift up student voices and promote community-building and social solidarity? What are its capacities for creativity and production? How will data and information about learning be secured and shared? What are learners options for free and informed consent and sovereignty over the technologies they use? All these questions rely on the professional judgment of educators empowered to make decisions that are informed by the context in which they teach and learn, and critical awareness of automated inequalities (Eubanks, 2018). Natural allies in this work already exist in the digital justice movement.

The account that opened this commentary suggests that pandemic pedagogies are not a temporary, crisis-oriented response, but rather an opening to new modes of social solidarity, and digital justice as we build resiliency for other collective challenges, including those of the climate crisis, the intensification of inequality, and public health crises yet to come (Bayne et al, 2020). What becomes of this moment will not be determined by technology integration alone, but rather by intentional decisions about the social-political-material-ethical-digital futures we want.

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