Digital Equity and Black Brazilians: A Freirean Liberatory Pedagogical Approach

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Abstract: In this paper, the authors examine the history of the colonization of Brazil through the transatlantic Black slave trade and the effects this history has had upon digital equity experienced by Black Brazilians in the information age. This examination is conducted using the philosophical lenses of critical theory and Critical Race Theory (CRT). The tenets of critical theory deal with power and dominance and the oppressed and the oppressors within a society. As such, critical theorists and scholars aim to expose power relationships, dominance, oppression, and injustices. Critical Race Theory evolved from critical theory and was developed by U.S. scholars. A major tenet of CRT is the claim that racism is so pervasive and endemic that, with the exception of the most blatant acts, it appears normal. Coming from these perspectives, these authors join other scholars in the belief that racism does, in fact, exist in Brazilian societies and join with those who aim to dispel ‘the myth of racial democracy’ and the myth of racial harmony in a country with roots in a race-based system of slavery and peonage. The authors are motivated by the belief that issues of digital equity and equality of opportunity can only be effectively addressed if one has a deep understanding of the factors that led to inequities, particularly inequities that preceded the information age. In addition, the authors look to Brazilian scholar and activist, Paulo Freire (1972), author of Pedagogy of the Oppressed, and his liberatory pedagogy for countering discriminatory practices, particularly in educational settings and institutions. They then suggest ways in which Freire’s pedagogy can be used to conceptualize liberatory uses of technology tools to dismantle the racist influences embedded in school practices and curricula.

Keywords: Digital divide, culture, literacy, pedagogy, opportunity

1. Critical and Historical Perspectives on Digital Equity

In examining the issue of digital equity today, many researchers have gone beyond exploring mere access to computer-related technologies by individuals or groups
in society (i.e. Mack, 2001; van Dijk, 2005). Consequently, in this age of rapid change, technological development, and the widespread availability of information communication technologies (ICTs), the broader definition of technology and digital equity has evolved which includes differential access to and use of computer-related resources by various groups in society. Employing social justice perspectives to examine these issues, the authors focus upon the effects that the information and digital age has upon specific social identity groups who have historically been oppressed and discriminated against. The use of historical methodologies and critical social theories aid in this analysis as they center their attention upon those within the African diaspora.

1.1 Critical Social Theories

A critical social theory is one that examines power relationships and addresses issues of oppression and domination. Typically, such a theory addresses issues of racism, classism, sexism, and/or other forms discriminatory practices, behaviors, and policies aimed at specific social identity groups that have been historically underserved. Social identity grouping involves how individuals align themselves or are assigned by others according to race/ethnicity, religion, gender, language, and other aspects of culture. The shared and most salient characteristics of those within the African diaspora include those subjugated as a result of colonization due to their Black African lineage and heritage and associated racial and ethnic identities. The colonization of North and South America, particularly the United States and Brazil, was facilitated through the racist transatlantic Black slave trade. As a result, the overwhelming majority of Blacks living in these countries today align themselves within or are assigned to this social identity grouping, despite differences among them concerning other cultural traditions and cultural features (i.e. language).

1.1.1 Critical Theory and Critical Pedagogy

The authors believe that an appropriate critical social theory to use in examining digital equity within and among marginalized social identity groups is critical theory along with critical pedagogy, which attempts to implement the tenets of critical theory within educational settings. The tenets of critical theory deal with power and dominance and the oppressed and the oppressors within a society. It is heavily influenced by Marxist philosophy, which historically has focused upon society’s economic base and means of production. As such, Marxists believe that institutions and systems support the economic base and the hierarchies of workers and owners in production. (Block, 1994) They are concerned with justice in the general society as well as in schools. Critical theorists and scholars aim to expose power relationships, dominance, oppression, and injustices. Many critical theorists also believe in reproduction theory. Reproduction theorists contend that many
institutions, including educational institutions, serve to maintain or reproduce the system of government, economy, and the power hierarchies that exist in a society. For example, the U.S. or Brazilian educational systems and pedagogical practices carried out within them will reproduce existing unjust systems, inequities, and power relationships. They also believe that, in many cases, the dominated or oppressed become complicit or contribute to their domination or oppression by internalizing the perspectives of those in power. The term referred to as hegemony speaks to the widespread adoption of dominant views within a society even when the adoption of such views contribute to the demise of the individual or group who adopts such views or perspectives. In addition, acceptance of dominant views and narratives often defies common sense, as explained in the following:

"Hegemony supposes the existence of something which is truly total, which is not merely secondary or superstructural…but which is lived at such a depth, which saturates the society to such an extent, and which…even constitutes the substance and limit of common sense for most people under its sway, that it corresponds to the reality of social experience…" (Williams, 1980, p. 37 as cited in Block, 1994, p. 71)

On the other hand, many critical theorists also espouse resistance theory. Resistance theories claim that in many cases the dominated and oppressed, although they are sometimes virtually powerless to control or change their fate, do not accept oppression nor do they accept negative views of themselves. Furthermore, these theorists contend that the oppressed offer considerable resistance to powerful forces. (Martusewicz and Reynolds, 1994, pp. 6-9)

The authors of this paper believe that we can see examples of reproduction theory, hegemony, and resistance theory operating within marginalized groups. As a result of media representations, school curricula and curricular materials, and how they have been treated historically, marginalized social identity groups may internalize and take on the negative views of their oppressors and, consequently, view themselves as inferior. Whereas, others in these same groups, even though they may have no power to affect change, refuse to accept those negative views of themselves.

In summary, critical theory and critical pedagogy, along with reproduction and resistance theories, can potentially shed light upon the experiences of those in the African diaspora, particularly concerning technology and digital equity in educational settings.

1.1.2 Critical Race Theory
Other critical social theorists would agree that critical theory does an effectual job of examining and analyzing injustices, oppression, and inequities that affect the rich and poor in societies but they may believe that the social construct of race is not adequately addressed. Consequently, Critical Race Theory (CRT), which has roots in critical theory, critical legal studies, and the law, was developed in the 1970s by Harvard Law professors in the U.S. Of course, race is the salient feature
for defining the social identity grouping that the critical race theorists focused upon and African American experiences, within the context of the U.S. legal system, were initially the target of their analysis.

Critical race theorists have often called upon its major tenets when examining Black and White racial relationships within the U.S. The first is the claim that racism is pervasive in American society and is hegemonic in nature. Further, racism has taken on the face of normalcy. Consequently, racist attitudes, views, policies, and behaviors are so ingrained in the society, that all but the most egregious, explicit acts are identified as racist. (see Bell, 1980, 1987; Delgado, 1995)

Other scholars have applied the tenets of CRT in their analysis of the treatment of other marginalized social identity groups within the U.S. (i.e. Solorzano & Bernal, 2001). Because of shared history and the salience of the social construct of race within this theoretical perspective, the authors of this paper contend that CRT can shed light upon the past and current experiences of Blacks within the African diaspora. As such, we examine the sometimes invisible yet endemic nature of racism in Brazilian society and its institutions. These analyses are important if one is to understand issues of digital equity in Brazilian society, particularly in its educational institutions.

**1.2 History of Blacks in the Colonization of Brazil**

Leigh (2008) coined the term ‘analog divide’ in reference to inequities in non computer related resources that existed for Blacks in the U. S. prior to the information age and points out, “…the racist attitudes and policies that gave rise to the analog divide have been woven into the fabric of our society and have resulted in structural inequalities that serve to maintain these divides. Again, it is these previous injustices and resulting structural inequalities that we must address and find solutions to before we can adequately address the issue of the digital divide. (p. 3)” The authors of this paper contend that explorations of the histories of Blacks in the African diaspora, which fostered analog divides, will shed light upon current digital inequities and illuminate ways in which we resist and create just solutions. In this instance, we examine the history of the colonization of Brazil through the transatlantic Black slave trade and its impact upon Black Brazilians in their past and present societies.

The history of the Brazilian sugar plantation complex, which used the coerced labor of Africans stolen from their homes, was preceded by Portugal’s early involvement in slave trading of Black Africans on the European continent and within its country’s borders. This Brazilian history also followed the enslavement by the Portuguese of indigenous residents and Blacks Africans in the colonization of the Atlantic islands, which were in convenient proximity to the western coast of the African continent. This plantation complex, created on the Atlantic Islands, and the use of a “controlled and usually ethnically distinct labor force associated with sugar agriculture” (Swartz, 1986, p. 7) served as a model and reflected what
the Portuguese would accomplish in Brazil after their attempts to enslave indigenous American Indians failed. Therefore, by the time the transatlantic Black slave trade was well underway and Africans were being stolen and transported directly from Africa in alarming numbers and disturbing conditions to the New World, the Portuguese in Brazil had much experience to draw on. By this time, the Portuguese colonists had already dealt with the Black slave runaways and rebellions on the Atlantic islands, the Indian wars and Indian slave runaways and rebellions in Brazil, and, in many instances, the failure to assimilate and deculturalize either—all of which contributed to the demise of some sugar plantations and the loss of coveted profits for the Portuguese crown and its nobility. It is reasonable to conclude that the Portuguese had much to teach its neighbors to the north about the treatment and control of an enslaved Black African labor force.

There has been an ongoing debate concerning the nature of the system of Black African slavery used in the colonization of Brazil and the presence or absence of racism in post nineteenth century Brazilian societies that resulted. Scholars on one side of the issue, contend that the enslavement of Indians and later Black Africans on the sugar plantations of Bahia and other Brazilian states was far less severe in comparison to the conditions and treatment typical of what was found in the southern plantations of the United States. In addition, many point to the prevalence of racial mixing and the creation of a multiracial Brazilian society, even during the colonial period, mitigated racist attitudes and behaviors. Giberto Freyre is often cited as one most influential in propagating this line of reasoning and thought (see Swartz, 1986, p. xv; Swartz’ preface in Mattoso, 1986, pp. viii–ix). On the other hand, scholars, mostly from San Paulo, contradict what they describe as a rosy or idyllic view of Brazilian history and current racial relationships. Consequently, those that oppose Gilberto Freyre’s idea of post nineteenth-century Brazilian society characterize it as a ‘myth of racial democracy’ (see Apple, 2003, p. 108; Gonçalves e Silva, 2005, p. 303; Machado da Silva, 2005 p. 297). This latter view and critique of Freyre is more congruent with the perspectives of critical theorists and critical race theorists concerning what transpired during the enslavement of Africans in Brazil and their interpretations concerning the resulting effects upon Black Brazilians in modern-day societies.

2. Freire’s Liberatory Pedagogy

Many historical analysts of the colonization of Brazil have examined the legacy of oppression of African Brazilians after the abolition of slavery in 1888 (Telles & Lim, 1998; Lovell, 1994; Andrews, 1992). It is within this context that the theory of reproduction helps the authors of this paper examine aspects of this legacy and discuss ways in which the economic and social exploitation of African Brazilians
has contributed to their marginalization. Moreover, it is the authors’ intention to explore in this paper how these practices continue to have profound present-day implications for technology, education and equity.

Similar to other societies that were multiracialized through colonization, schools often functioned as tools to establish and maintain cultural and economic hegemony. In this sense, either having access to schooling or not, both worked effectively to achieve the intended goal of colonization. Prior to World War II, schools as either a nationally or locally government sanctioned institution were not promoted as an affordance of Brazilian citizenship (Andrew, 1992). Since the creation of the Brazilian state in 1822, receiving a formal education was a privilege and was mostly available to wealthy White Brazilians. Even with local Brazilian governments assuming the responsibility to make education a funded mandate after World War II, the educational divides between the poor and wealthy, light skinned and dark, continued to be strikingly wide. As late as 1950, almost sixty percent of White Brazilians were labeled as literate, compared to thirty-one and twenty-six percent, Mulatto and Black respectively (Andrew, 1992). For a majority of African Brazilians, access to formal education continued to be both limited and of poor quality. This circumstance helped to maintain their status in bottom rungs of Brazil’s economic class structure (Lovell, 1994). When formal education was made accessible to Blacks, it had tied to it a hidden deculturalizing agenda. Freire and Macedo (1987) argued that the colonial structure of schools served to inculcate the African natives with myths and beliefs that belittled their culture, history, and language (p. 143). Education as a means to expeditiously “colonize the minds” of Blacks had extremely negative impact on future generations of this population. Accepting this colonial mentality meant that African Brazilians would need to view that their place within the social and economic class structure created by Brazil’s Portuguese colonizers as normal and just.

Paulo Freire, a Brazilian philosopher, scholar and activist has written extensively about how historically situated economic, political and social structures and practices have collectively subjugated African Brazilians, therefore, creating their present day social reality (Freire, 1972, 1974; Shor & Freire, 1987). In an effort to help Blacks create a more equitable and just reality for themselves, Freire sought to help them develop literacy skills and simultaneously construct a critical awareness of the ways in which the governing elite regulated their access to the larger Brazilian opportunity structure. He advocated that to become literate both mechanically (read and write) and critically (social awareness) are essential skills for one to gain full participation in a democratic society. Freire articulated the following about the meaning of literacy:

[As a narrative for agency], literacy becomes synonymous with an attempt to rescue history, experience, and vision from conventional discourse and dominant social relations. It means developing the theoretical and practical conditions through which human beings can locate themselves in their own histories and in doing so make
themselves agents in the struggle to expand the possibilities of human life and freedom. (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p.10)

Many scholars have referred to this attempt to help members of oppressed groups and their political allies rescue history, experience, and vision within an educational context as a form of critical pedagogy. Giroux (cited in Duarte and Smith, 2000) explains that pedagogy is removed from its exclusive emphasis on management and is defined as a form of political leadership and ethical address (p. 199). Kincheloe and Steinberg (2002) seek to expand upon the goals of critical pedagogy within a learning context. They suggest that teachers should be able to help students overcome social barriers by engaging the students in the exploration of different ways of reading the work, methods of resisting oppression and vision of progressive democratic communities. The goal of critical educational approach is to prepare students to see themselves as sites of political struggle in relation to oppressive and democratic forces, and move them to a recognition of the forces that shape their identity, the various stages of reflective self-awareness and the strategies their personal empowerment demand (Kincheloe and Steinberg, 2002).

Freire’s use of critical pedagogy was best exemplified with his work using Culture Circles to help African Brazilian workers and other poor working class adults not only learn how to read and write but to break the psychological and material chains that held them in a economic and social purgatory. Culture Circles grew out of an Adult Education project of the Movement of Popular Culture in the 1950’s. Freire referred to this project as Culture Circles instead of schools because he wanted to challenge the discursive meanings and practices that convey conceptions of authority and dominant epistemologies often promoted by schools. This notion about the need to resist the oppressive language of schooling was also reflected in how the roles of teacher, students and their practices were constructed. In this instance, teachers were referred to as coordinators, students were called group participants and the method by which they interacted was called dialogue. This method Freire termed dialogic inquiry created a context for group participants to meet to reflect on their reality as they make and remake it (Shor p. 98) It was through this process of dialogue that Freire sought to help Blacks interrogate critical forms of knowledge and understandings about their own historical reality and acquire tools for dismantling oppressive structures and practices firmly embedded in Brazilian life and society.

The question remains, how does the history of African Brazilians and Freire’s use of Culture Circles help to offer new perspectives about the digital divide and its ill effects on Black Brazilian’s ability to fully experience their own humanity? Furthermore, inquiries that call into question how education within the context of technology access and use has the potential to subjugate or liberate the minds and bodies of Black Brazilians is a critical goal of this discussion. Therefore, the authors of this paper contend that examining learning implications concerning equity and the digital divide become even more essential when considering the strong push over the last two decades for U.S. schools to expedite the process of
infusing technology into the K–12 curricula as a way to bring about needed reform.

Freire’s aforementioned dialogical inquiry process provides a framework for understanding how technology can play a role in supporting pedagogies that create opportunities for emancipatory learning. According to Sleeter and Bernal (2004), there are four major components of Freire’s dialogical process:

1. Supports a pedagogy of empowerment in which the teacher acts as a partner with the students
2. Uses problem posing as a way to help students critically examine their own experience and historical location
3. Students are creators of knowledge and their classroom practices reflect democratic ideals.
4. Class materials are used as tools for expanding students’ analyses

All four of these components were reflected in the pedagogies Freire used in his Adult literacy project in Brazil, not only as a means to help African Brazilians learn to read and write, but to develop a critical understanding about their own social reality. In order to support and enhance learning, Freire introduced the use of slide projectors in these Culture Circles. Freire showed participants in the Culture Circle via the slide projector, images depicting their communities and used them to facilitate critical exchanges about how their identities and experiences were mediated by various ideological, institutional and historical forces. Moreover, tied to this analysis, were dialogues that helped form the foundation for learning about phonemics, grammar usage, and syntax. According to Kahn & Kellner (2007), Freire viewed the use of technology as essential in helping to foster a collective learning environment and amplify reflective distancing (p. 435). His clairvoyant understandings about technology use is reflected in the work of Anderson (2001) and Gorski (2001), written nearly fifty years later, in which they asserted that digital learning technologies can be powerful tools that support collaborative teaching and learning, student mastery of skills and acquisition of knowledge, all of which are key components of effective critical pedagogy.

Another major goal of technology use within the Culture Circles was to build capacity for political agency within African Brazilian communities. Kahn & Kellner elaborated the following regarding Freire’s vision for technology use as a way to support this form of critical learning: He argued for the importance of teaching media literacy to empower individuals against manipulation and oppression, and of using the most appropriate media to help teach the subject matter in question (p. 435). Whereas, Freire’s notions about ways technology can be used to support critical education are clear, it too, should be understood that he was keenly aware of the propensity for technology to be used as a tool for domination and dehumanization (Freire, 1972). More specifically, Freire envisioned how technologies (both analog and digital) would help reproduce and sustain Brazil’s social and economic class structure. As a way to assist in this process of economic stratification, the governing elite situated matters concerning
technology within a depoliticized discourse by solely hailing its remarkable ability to advance the economic development of Brazil. Therefore, notions about the value of technology use, shaped by globalism and in the name of market dominance, would likely continue to only benefit a wealthy few at the expense of the majority who were poor and working class.

Gomez (2006) explained how the possibilities of full societal participation for the poor and marginalized could be realized for all those who became technically, digitally and critically literate. She articulates the following:

And in the internet sphere, this [embodiment of characteristics of inquiry creativeness, and agency] could be possible if citizens were able to use and understand the process of creating messages and forwarding them, in other words, to declare his word, “to write to the word”. Once this can be achieved, the practices of digital literacy would provide maximum benefit to the individual and the community (p. 55).

Creating opportunities for members of oppressed groups to not only have access to the technology, but learn how to exercise its use in ways that are liberating should be an essential goal of schools. Drawing from Paulo Freire’s and others illuminating works, the authors of this paper contend that contemporary issues surrounding technology in education must be viewed through a critical theoretical lens. What is called for here is a new language of resistance that couples the constructs of technology access and use together in ways that connote notions of liberation, transformation, and empowerment. Though deliberately interlocking these concepts in the technology debate, the causes of the digital divide and how technology can be used to help bridge the chasm between those who have access, and those who do not, will become a central theme for critical analysis in K-12 education.

3. Concluding Thoughts

The authors framed this paper from an historical and critical theory / critical race theory perspective. They demonstrated that the social construct of race became a central factor in the enslavement of Africans for the purpose of colonizing Brazil. Moreover, the authors further contend that this history of blatant and extreme racist behaviors and attitudes continues to have effects upon Black Brazilians today and, in fact, congruent with CRT beliefs, they further claim that racism is woven into the fabric of Brazilian society. Such racism can be so pervasive and commonplace that it appears normal both to the perpetrators and targets of behaviors and attitudes. While violent attacks or overt insults, epithets, or name calling may alert one to the existence of racism, often ignored are the messages of inferiority and demeaning images of specific racial or ethnic social identity groups, which have a constant presence in various forms of analog and digital
media. Additionally, the authors purpose that the version of history that purports that Black enslavement in Brazil was somehow less cruel and brutal than in North American is a majoritarian or grand narrative that benefits the dominant or ruling class. The related notion, which fits into this dominant narrative, is that racism is now absent within this country that can boast of the highest percentage of Black African descendent that now occupy the lowest rungs of society in terms of economics and other factors determining social status. Lacking, for so many years, the counter-stories purposed by critical race theories, these grand narratives have become hegemonous among many Whites, Blacks, and mixed racial groups. However, there are those who are resisting these hegemonous notions of equality and racial harmony. Machado da Silva (2005) explains:

Our goal at this point is to help our community understand that racial discrimination in Brazil and in the world can be described as a set of economic, political, social, and ideological relations—as a systemic process grounded in everyday life. Because it is so pervasive, in general, racism is tolerated as if it were a “normal” procedure of the dominant (White) culture (p. 299) [emphasis added].

In terms of analog equity in Brazilian schools and curricula today, Goncalves e Silva (2005) presents statistics to support her claim that “…Afro Brazilians are, for the most part, outside of schools physically and culturally” (p. 303) and goes on to report, “Textbooks…that have been written taking into account only the Euro Brazilian (White) point of view, do not include enough information concerning African and African Brazilian history and culture (p. 304).”

Given this state of affairs, the authors outlined a strategy for countering the analog inequities of the past and present by promoting technology literacy and dialog within Friere’s pedagogical model to create emancipatory environments. Areas of future research for these authors involve investigating how other instructional technology tools or strategies might be effective within such a model.

References


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