

Commentary: Crossing the Digital Divide: How Race, Class, and Culture Matter

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The opening remarks offered by Swensen, Rozema, Young, McGrail, and Whitin (2005) make a significant contribution by creating a space for reflection and subsequent action at the intersection of English teacher preparation and technology.

In their introduction, they note that educators should not assume that the adoption of these newer technologies is inevitable, or that such advances necessarily signal fully desirable outcomes. Although this may be true, and truer still that schools have been notoriously slow in implementing technological change (ditto machines are still alive and well in many school buildings as the primary means of duplicating documents, for example), it is also true that the integration of such technologies into the workplace and in public schools has more than just begun. The discussion about English teacher preparation and technology is necessary and one already well overdue, given the phenomenal gains technology has made and the pervasiveness of its flowering in modern American culture.

In a very short time span, technology has become seamlessly integrated into our consciousness so quickly and deeply that we cannot fully absorb the full range of changes that have been wrought. For example, the Swensen et al. begin their discussion of technology and teacher preparation by providing an extensive glossary of technological terms. Yet the opening discussion of newer technologies and newer literacies contains four terms not represented in the glossary: hardware, peripherals, software, and interfaces. Although a minor oversight, I feel this omission demonstrates how rapidly the language of technology has entered our collective lexicon. It is almost impossible to be consciously aware of the many ways it has permeated our everyday language.

In the past 15 years, we have experienced a technological revolution. Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, and Cammack (2004), pointed to the most recent cohorts of high school graduates, who began school using conventional paper, pen, and pencil literacies, but graduated having experienced and become adept at manipulating a multitude of technology literacies such as word processing, the Internet, listservs, and instant messaging that came into existence during their brief tenure as students.

As Swensen et al. (2005) point out, the integration of technology into the teaching of English language arts and literacy is not an inevitable process of succession. The decision on how to integrate the new literacies and which literacies to integrate should be based on an understanding of best practice coupled with an awareness of their costs and benefits. Yet, time is of the essence in considering the issues now on the table, since computer usage in schools has been increasing exponentially. In a 1999 U.S. Department of Education survey, 99% of teachers responding reported that computers were available in

their schools. That same year, 95% of all schools reported that they had access to the Internet, a significant increase over the 35% who reported access in 1994. Thus, whether this new, technology-rich age represents desirable progress or not, and whether the schools take on the challenge of integrating these new literacies into the existing curricula, the computer age is and has been well upon us.

Even though computers are becoming more prevalent, and computer skills more essential to success, the rapidly increasing digital divide continues to separate those who have access to computers from those who do not. The figures quoted above about the availability of computers in schools do not provide details about the types and quality of computer technology available to students and teachers in high-poverty urban school settings as opposed to those in more affluent suburban schools. Swenson et al. (2005) rightly note the existence of this divide and its strong connection to issues of social, economic and political power. Information provided by The National Center for Education Statistics (Rathbun & West, 2003) confirmed this view. In a study on young children's access to computers at home and at school, the defining characteristics that demarcate "haves" from "have-nots" are racial/ethnic and economic.

The new technologies play a critical role in educational and career success, but access to the new technologies is not equitably available. Even in kindergarten and first grade classrooms, minority children from families of lower socioeconomic status (SES) are less likely to attend schools that provide computer access in their classrooms than children in the highest SES groups.

Leu and Kinzer (2000) noted that social and economic inequities exist not only within our country but internationally as well. Such inequities cause the potential benefits of technology to accrue to some advantaged groups and not others. In such cases, the problem is always one of power, rather than technology. In the United States, differences in class and educational advantage have long existed. These have become even more exacerbated with the clear links between technology access and income.

Teacher education has yet to place an emphasis on effective teaching for diversity that is commensurate with the urgent situation that currently exists in schools. Ladson-Billings (2001) noted, "Now as we enter the twenty-first century, we realize that teacher education continues to languish in the practices of a bygone era" (p. 3). The culture of teacher education must place front and center issues of race, class, and culture that have too long been acknowledged but marginalized. Without this emphasis, the emergence of the new technologies will only contribute to the ever-widening digital divide.

References

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