

INTRODUCTION

Glimpsing the Kaleidoscope of Praxis

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The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference. The opposite of beauty is not ugliness, it's indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference. And the opposite of life is not death, but indifference.

WIESEL (1986)



Digital literacies now thoroughly permeate teaching and learning. To keep pace with learners' engagement, educators are challenged to learn and bring these quickly evolving tools, which arguably grow fastest outside of schooling, into formal learning spaces. A critical component is necessary to ensure that both teachers and learners are not manipulated by the latest glittering technology or seduced by the often-inequitable power structures holding technological advancements in place. In the digital age, when we can be simultaneously more connected *and* isolated, literacy practitioners continue to benefit from glimpsing other educators' classrooms—undoubtedly complex and varying kaleidoscopic views.

Since the term Critical Digital Literacies (CDL) was introduced in 2012, as “skills and practices that lead to the creation of digital texts that interrogate the world ... [that] also allow and foster the interrogation of digital, multimodal texts” (Ávila & Pandya, 2012, p. 3), digital literacies have progressed, and we have an enduring need for criticality as both consumers and creators. While digital literacies themselves challenge mainstream and conventional notions of expertise, ability, authorship, writing and composing, Critical Digital Literacies are uniquely positioned to extend and elaborate these challenges given that questioning and shifting are at the root of the original definition. While we established the groundwork of CDL in the first volume, in this one, we present glimpses of the kaleidoscope of CDL praxis, containing the linked and related elements of digital tools and critical engagement and reflection, bordered by the constraints of formal schooling.

The purpose of these chapters is to explore and share educators' efforts to integrate CDL into K-16 educational experiences (and, in the process, to redesign the term CDL itself). The accompanying goal is to illuminate how CDL practices might encourage and sustain border-traversing of many sorts even while bounded by schooling—e.g., spatially as learners carry individual practices across locations; academically as CDL can encompass different, perhaps divergent, intellectual traditions and disciplines; aesthetically as our levels of engagement shift according to the design elements present and varied emotional responses evoked; and rhetorically and linguistically as we acquire various discourses and languages. Just as the original volume on Critical Digital Literacies integrated research on both critical and digital literacies in groundbreaking ways, so too does this volume further illuminate both of these relevant and compelling areas of literacy research; furthermore, the chapters collected here offer a unique and pragmatic set of instructional approaches. As students learn to move in and out of sometimes tense and contradictory groups and situations, we, as educators, can help them, using both critical and digital tools, to navigate language and literacy in empowering ways. However, Critical Digital Literacies matter beyond the classroom, even if that is where we cultivate them.

As educators, we are in an opportune position to help students learn to question the ignorance that persists in the world; it is more crucial than ever as we see, in public discourse(s), evidence of an alarming lack of critical thought accompanied by the injustice it engenders. We are charged with the cultivation of literate citizens who speak back to the world and challenge what they find there. To defy apathy, multifaceted participation in school and society is key. In this volume, we share a set of practices that can encourage questioning and counter indifference.

Long before we were concerned with digital learning, Dewey (1916/2008) outlined how education might be a democratic endeavor, an issue that in some sense has changed very little. We are still struggling to create Dewey's definition of a democracy as "(a) society which makes provision for participation in its good of all its members on equal terms and which secures flexible readjustment of its institutions through interaction of the different forms of associated life ..." (p. 105). As a component of such a society, education would be "a freeing of individual capacity in a progressive growth directed to social aims" (p. 105). Digital innovation facilitates societal participation, and the internet has become a "place" for us to push for equality and to push back on institutions. And school is one institution that continues to remind us of the relevance of Dewey's belief that we might, and can, do better to help individuals realize their capacities. We now have digital tools, combined with a critical stance, to

do some of that work. In this sense, Critical Digital Literacies are but one modern iteration of a long line of educational work, one concerned with equality, using whichever means and methods are available.

In the following sections of this introduction, I provide a brief summary of the original CDL theoretical framework as well an overview of each chapter.

1 CDL Framework

In our original volume, we looked to both canonical and then-recent literature on critical and digital literacies to construct our framework. Citing Freire (2000) and Foucault (1975), we stated that,

The main, underlying goal of critical literacy praxis is twofold: to investigate manifestations of power relations in texts, and to design, and in some cases redesign, texts in ways that serve other, less powerful interests ... Critical literacies provide skills and tools to address social and educational inequalities and assist us in continuing to read the world, a world that is increasingly digital. (Ávila & Pandya, 2012, p. 2)

We also drew upon “the four resources model” (Freebody & Luke, 2003) to conceive of “critical literacies as those practices and skills that help investigate the ways readers use texts and texts use readers” (Ávila & Pandya, 2012, pp. 2–3).

Our framework for the digital aspect of Critical Digital Literacies included defining “digital literacies as those practices in which people use technological tools to engage with, respond to, and create, both text-based and multimodal forms of literacy” (Ávila & Pandya, 2012, p. 3). Citing Jenkins et al. (2009), we asserted that CDL “should, arguably, appeal to a variety of educators because, at its best, it offers alternative methods of teaching, learning, production, and assessment that have the potential to disrupt traditional banking systems of education (Freire, 2000)” (Ávila & Pandya, 2012, p. 4). We asserted that the ability to be designers (Kress, 2010), creators, and authors means that CDL

contain the potential to blur the boundaries between “us” and “them,” especially when the “us” is the authoritative expert facing the novices. So, from the first, engaging with learners in digital activities results in a constant shifting of the position of expert at the apex. Educators and learners often share the roles of experts and teachers, and, when students lead, they define participation itself. (Ávila & Pandya, 2012, p. 5)

One of the final points that we made in our initial sketching out of the CDL landscape was to conceive of “each critical digital literacy context as transformative in a Foucauldian sense—as ‘a free atmosphere, one constantly agitated by a permanent criticism’ (1998, p. 155)” (p. 6). This point still applies. In this volume, contributors describe efforts at transformation through a constant critical lens.

The word “skills” that we used in the original definitions captures the tension of CDL in schooling: more inclusive conceptions of teaching and learning come up against reductionist ones in a context of often strangling accountability. The word “skills” used in the original CDL definition is itself a hybridization (Bakhtin, 1981) that characterizes the current situation of literacy in schooling; it carries the legacy of a reductive reference to literacy as a decontextualized and concrete set of proficiencies as well as our intended meaning of a more dynamic and context-dependent range of abilities.

A tenet that connects both volumes is that our framework can sustain nuanced definitions of CDL in diverse environments. There is no standard or prescribed definition or set of “best practices” in CDL. As part of a sociocultural approach to literacy more broadly, each educator enacts it in a unique and specific environment. What we see in these chapters is that both teachers and students have to negotiate hybridity, tension, and discord while learning Critical Digital Literacies. Despite the constant pressures of accountability, we can continue to question standardization and external mandates by non-educators in order to develop our own pedagogical approaches—to turn the kaleidoscope so that our own practices, and agency, remain dynamic.

2 Kaleidoscopic Possibilities

Critical Digital Literacies always involve reaching for realizations of teachers’ and students’ goals as well as striving toward potential—the potential to be more powerful and powerfully informed (digital) citizens. While there might be space enough for multiple operationalized definitions of CDL, these definitions are bounded rather than infinite. The working definition of CDL in this introduction builds upon our original one: Critical Digital Literacies are activities and practices that lead to the creation, and revision, of digital texts that interrogate the world; they also encourage and develop the interrogation of digital, multimedia texts, incorporating an element of critical reflection to further engagement. This definition containing the activities and practices described in this volume, bounded by educational realities on four sides, can be seen in Figure 1.1, where the collective share definitional common ground.

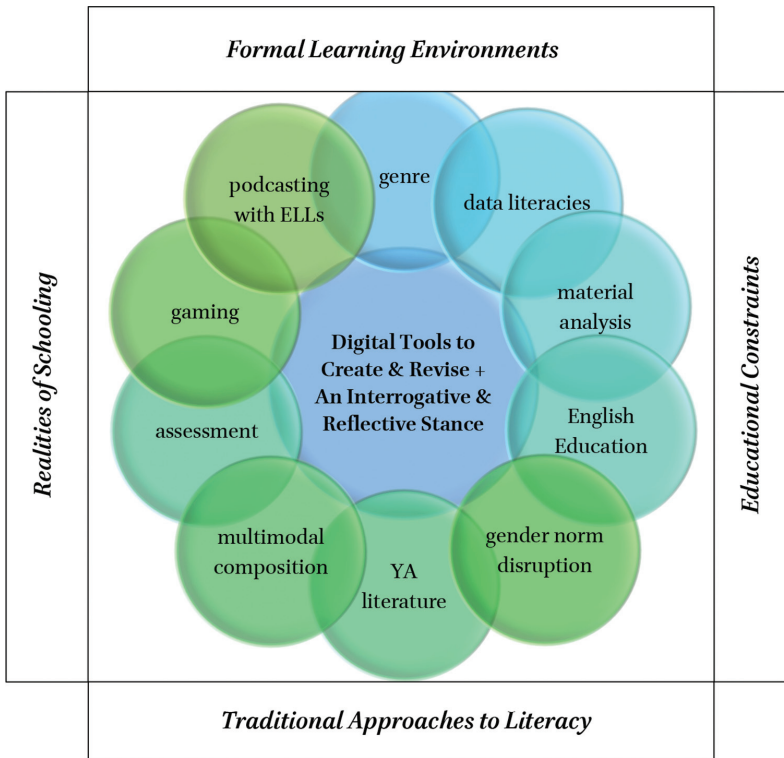


FIGURE 1.1 The working definitions of CDL in this volume

Whereas we called on the metaphor of travel in the first volume, in this introduction, I spin a metaphorical kaleidoscope. Both share the dynamism of movement although the latter, itself a sort of smaller landscape, has edges and borders that are more readily visible and, therefore, constraining. A kaleidoscope invites turning, a shifting of the view to see what the colors will reveal. Turning its wheel is an individual experience. Viewing it can seem unwieldy—not necessarily chaotic but potentially overwhelming if it contains many colorful and dizzying elements at play. Once it pauses, we catch a glimpse of the pattern and the productivity and can observe, even if only for a moment, the scene.

Critical Digital Literacies are kaleidoscopic in nature. They take on new life once they start moving so that new illustrations become visible. Reading about them is not the whole experience as another dimension is possible once CDL *activities* are implemented. But each implementer will have a distinct experience as Critical Digital Literacies are not meant to be the same experience for all. Both critical and digital literacies can seem overwhelming to implement, as we acknowledged in the first volume, but rewards for doing so, I continue

to assert, include a vibrant teaching and learning experience. What we have in this volume is a collection of CDL scenes, where educators have looked through the kaleidoscope and are reporting back.

Just like the metaphor of travel, the idea of spinning a kaleidoscope can seem like a romantic notion in a decidedly unromantic time when we see critical literacy discouraged in mainstream and mandated curricula; after all, students who question everything do not make the most compliant and quiet of citizens. But we should not be lyrical at the expense of being critical, and, admittedly, a metaphor takes us only so far. At metaphor's edge, we require praxis, which is what this volume proposes to provide as a "mov(e) towards a pluralistic emphasis on teacher repertoire" (Luke, 2018, p. 17). As someone who has worked as a teacher and teacher-educator since 1997, I know that educators need activities and approaches to feel prepared to stand in front of their classes. Accordingly, contributors illustrate how we might structure and implement CDL practices even as we redefine and amend them to fit our own unique circumstances.

3 Overview of the Chapters

This volume is separated into three parts according to each chapter's primary focus in exploring Critical Digital Literacies version 2.0: Part 1: Extending and Reimagining the Original Definition of Critical Digital Literacies; Part 2: Critical Digital Literacies in Teacher Education; and Part 3: CDL Activities in the Classroom. I provide a synthesis of each chapter below, which, collectively, contribute to the kaleidoscope of CDL praxis.

3.1 *Part 1: Extending and Reimagining the Original Definition of Critical Digital Literacies*

In Part 1, authors describe how they have built upon, expanded, and challenged the original conception of CDL. In Chapter 1, Ahn and Peña add a consideration of genre. They argue that we can use a Critical Digital Literacies lens to identify deceptive media—a compelling issue given the amount of information (including on social media) that students have to negotiate as part of daily life. Learners "need to be confident in their ability to distill coherent values from the information they receive, and to act on these values around important issues." To that end, they offer specific activities that students can participate in to create their own manipulated media so that they will not, in fact, be manipulated themselves.

In Chapter 2, Pangrazio and Cardozo-Gaibisso focus on critical data literacies with a description of their project that took place, over two years, in Australia and Uruguay. In this project, Data Smart Kids, their goal was to build upon the original definition of CDL “to see how [they] might prepare young people to develop critical understandings of social media platforms, which are largely designed and shaped around the commodification of personal data.” Traversing both school and home environments, they explore the challenges therein; additionally, they reveal what they have learned about students’ understandings of how personal data is collected and utilized as well as suggest how we might help them learn to be more critical of this fact.

In the last chapter of this part, Pötzsch argues that Critical Digital Literacies should include a critical materialist approach, which cultivates an awareness of technologies’ “affordances, economic embedding, and societal, environmental, as well as embodied, effects and repercussions.” Arguing that CDL is always surrounded and structured by digital capitalism, he offers a series of resources, applications, and activities that educators can implement in their own classrooms to increase awareness of the material dimension of technologies so that they can see digital empowerment for the complex and fraught thing that it is.

3.2 *Part 2: Critical Digital Literacies in Teacher Education*

The second part offers a concentrated focus on Critical Digital Literacies in teacher education courses and preparation. Jensen’s chapter utilizes the reflections of two preservice educators “to explore questions about developing CDL pedagogies in context,” while recognizing that CDL praxis has to compete with the often-crowded agenda of a given English teacher preparation program (including the broader context of writing instruction). Through critical self-reflection, which she models in this chapter, Jensen situates CDL in teacher preparation in a constructive and potentially transformative way, despite ongoing challenges to implementation, including preservice teachers’ own doubts and constraints.

In Chapter 5, Johnson and Galdeano, as a teacher education professor and student, respectively, convey a close and careful look at a series of interactions they had while Galdeano was in Johnson’s classes. Specifically, they “consider the ways assignments, rubrics, and mentor texts operated to constrain and facilitate Elena’s gender norm disruption in assignments that invited students to disrupt commonplace norms for gender via Critical Digital Literacies.” Through their explication of Johnson’s reactions and feedback to Galdeano’s CDL work, we see how well-meaning educators might be foreclosing

opportunities for LGBTQIA+ learners to find safe spaces not just in our classrooms but in our curricular practices.

Next, Piotrowski and Plaizier illustrate how we might combine young adult literature with Critical Digital Literacies. Focusing on two novels that are concerned with technological advancement, they write about the work of preservice teacher education students who created book reviews and lesson plans, which provides a detailed look at CDL-infused activities. They argue that students “demonstrated critical analysis and reflection about the uses of technology within the novels, which transferred to their own technological practices and identity as digital citizens.” Being able to view actual student work lends a valuable specificity to CDL-in-use for fellow educators.

3.3 *Part 3: CDL Activities in the Classroom*

The final part also contains another pragmatic dimension of Critical Digital Literacies: additional descriptions of CDL activities in classrooms. In Chapter 7, Smith and Hall examine the films that three adolescents created as part of the Excel Academy, an alternative college preparation program. In an illustration of boundary-crossing composing practices, they document “possibilities of how multimodality can be used in print-focused classrooms to enhance and influence the purposeful deployment of print in multimodal texts.” For educators who have to balance the demands of standardization, this is a much-needed portrayal of hybrid writing pedagogy.

In Chapter 8, Rice helps us make sense of what is perhaps Critical Digital Literacies’ most vexing issue: assessment. Employing a sociocultural lens, Rice describes four scenarios accompanied by discussions of how each “demonstrate teacher reflection as an assessment process utilizing both CDL characteristics and assessment principles.” Readers will appreciate the specificity included as it provides a possible diagram of how other educators might confront this unavoidable aspect of literacy education accompanied by a consideration of CDL principles.

Chapter 9 provides a glimpse at the intersection of Critical Digital Literacies and gaming. Bacalja documents the implementation of an Indigenous story-telling unit at two Australian secondary schools; he shares feedback from both students and teachers in this project. In an honest examination of the difficulties of operationalizing CDL gaming in a formal school environment, he maintains that gaming can be a vehicle for developing “critical dispositions.” To aid in that, he explores, with particular suggestions, how we might use gameworlds to engage our students in CDL praxis, even when efforts to do are affected by the realities of schooling.

In Chapter 10, Castrillón-Ángel and Mora depict the use of podcasting in a second-language education course, as an activity into which CDL can be

successfully integrated. One goal of their chapter is to illuminate the “potential of CDL to further disrupt existing narratives that place L2 learners as just digital consumers, instead revisiting their agency to recreate not just texts, but language itself.” As a second-language teacher in Columbia, and with Mora as his mentor, Castrillón-Ángel includes his own curricular unit that he has developed and refined with his own students; this unit can be implemented in a range of subject areas and across grade levels.

Lastly, Anna Smith, as a contributor to both the first collection and this one, concludes the volume by reminding us of the stubborn presence of “the machine and mechanisms of schooling,” which continually challenge our attempts at transformation, including the critical and digital kinds. We might, she suggests, need new machines altogether, and while we chip away at the outdated and unjust to make way for “a new vibrant learning ecology” we can utilize the tools of Critical Digital Literacies as part of our efforts.

4 Conclusion

Kaleidoscopes tempt us to keep them moving, and we might be motivated to spin them in order to glimpse a brighter alternative. We need to make CDL practices engaging to students as an alternative to stasis and, ultimately, indifference. We need, in order to strive for a more just world, a tough-minded and creative approach to CDL praxis—one in which we “keep asking, and keep wondering” (Greene, 2001, p. 91)—so that our colleagues can see how we enact these in our classrooms. The contributors to this volume have issues of social justice on their minds, and, to that end, they model the kinds of generative questioning that can advance a social justice agenda. However, the questions we ask are context-dependent and so cannot be universal. For that reason, we need as many views of CDL praxis as we can get. In this volume, we have added to the kaleidoscope. As you engage with the ideas in these chapters, we hope that you will question our assumptions and practices as you create your own working definitions of Critical Digital Literacies.

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