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The Role of Digital Media in Empowerment Education: Conceptualizing Participatory Methodology

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Abstract

This paper provides an overview of the issues surrounding fictional digital media in empowerment education and participatory action research. Following the theoretical underpinnings of Freire expanded by Nicholl's *Pedagogy of the Privileged*, the discussions first consider digital media as alternative mental spaces for pedagogy, engagement, and dissemination of knowledge. First, for oppressed youth, digital media can be employed as a Safespace in which some level of mental health respite is offered amidst forces of oppression in an individual's physical context of marginalization. Second, digital media can provide a Non-Safespace in which privileged and oppressed youth are engaged in collaborative discourse. Social justice themes that lead to incongruent perspectives between different youth can be presented as less confrontational via digital media - which can be utilized to offer multiple, iterative chances of collaborative learning. Third, digital media can be applied in research engagement as an Experimental Space, in which youth access opportunities to take on the perspectives and lived experiences of characters in both privilege and oppression alike. This immersion in the lived experiences of the other can lead to greater understanding and potential empathy towards future action against oppression. These three spaces offered by digital media may help overcome self-censorship that oppressed youth are forced into while presenting themselves in classroom and research settings. Negative emotions associated with living in oppression can be perceived as what Kemmis identifies as society's "unwelcome truths", often silenced, but given potential outlet via the digital realm. The complex interplay between reimbursement in research, social mobility, and societal expectations of oppressed youth to self-help is discussed in relation to inequitable power structures. Here, digital media presents an additional interrogation of inequality, as it allows youth to be creators - who amplify their own voices without needing approval from society.

Keywords: Inequalities, Empowerment, Intersectionality, Mental health, Access

Considerations through Freire, Nicholls, and Hooks

Digital media is often accessed by young generations out of their own interest. Through this self-access, digital media exhibits potential to serve as an alternative platform for empowerment education, serving youth barred from formal education settings. Today's digital media in its diverse forms of films, animations, e-books, games, and "serious games" (Susi et al., 2007) can collectively occupy many hours in the day of youth. Of note, regarding the scope of this paper, digital media is used to refer exclusively to *fictional* works for two considerations. First, non-fictional media intersects with social media, industrial journalism (Wall, 2018), intentionally falsified information (Lazer et al., 2018), and other massively complex elements which deserve separate, dedicated investigation. Secondly, knowledge that is merely converted to a web-based format - or presented to youth as facts - arguably does not inspire self-access behavior from youth, and neither does it provide significant space for youth to engage as creators.

In attempting to understand how digital media plays a role in empowerment education for underprivileged youth, grounding the methodology in Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) and Nicholl's *Pedagogy of the Privileged* (2011) is helpful. With regards to what constitutes empowerment education, this paper applies Freire's framework which sees education as potentially leading to a co-liberalized state of the oppressed and privileged classes in society: the oppressed is freed from forces and entities which devalue and dehumanize them in society, and the privileged is freed from participation in these oppressive acts. Thus, in relation to improving the well-being and future opportunities of youth who live in oppression around the global community, education which emphasizes social justice, anti-oppression, and ultimately - human equality - can be valuable to consider.

Freire describes that "one cannot expect positive results from an educational…program which fails to respect the particular view of the world held by the people" (2000). In investigating how digital media can serve as an effective tool of empowerment, grounding the research in knowledge and views held by underprivileged youth themselves is critical. Engaging underprivileged youth in research can help youth discover the value of their lived experience as "a way of knowing that coexists in a nonhierarchical way with other ways of knowing" (Hooks, 1994b, p.84). This perspective places the participants in a teaching role to the researcher who is learning from the youth's lived experience of marginalization. Macedo (2000) reinforces the significance of lived experience, writing that "[lived experience] constitutes a valuable knowledge base…to acquire a broad and critical understanding of the world in which [we] can live a life of human dignity".

Digital media is also directly present in theories of pedagogy. Nicholls writes that "film and literature" are tools to "develop a capacity for empathy that is otherwise stunted by the culture that directs [us] to become consumers instead of citizens" (2011). Development of empathy becomes arguably less important for underprivileged youth - whose lived experience may be more powerful than the fiction that is available on the market. Digital media nonetheless serves to bond underprivileged youth with their privileged peers, creating a common language to support discussions related to equality, empowerment, and empathy. Nicholls describes empathy as "identification with…other human beings - which is far more expansive…than mere pity for a victimized and degraded 'other'" (2011). Removal of degradation in empathy, in turn, could serve to eliminate classism as a factor of marginalization.

Digital media has long been used as informational tools to influence societal views of inequality. Hooks notes the role of digital media in historically reinforcing social inequalities, as a pervasive view of marginalized populations as "lazy", "unmotivated" to help themselves, or creating their own marginalization is often "socialized by film and television" (1994a, p. 168). In other words, with or without investigation, digital media can play a consistent, background role in education - communicating information, misinformation, and influencing views - all at a population scale. To challenge this, the following sections consider methodological uses of digital media for participatory action research, towards collaborative acts of challenging oppression.

Digital Media as Spaces

The role of digital media in the educational experience of underprivileged youth may be categorized into three spheres: digital media as the Safespace, the Non-Safespace, and the Experimental Space.

The Safespace

Freire notes that it is often difficult for the underprivileged to "find a place in the power structure" of society. This is further strengthened by the presence of privileged peers who may be "unwilling to see the system that has privileged them as corrupt and unjust, (and) want to believe—perhaps, need to believe—that people who 'fail' do so because they deserve it" (Nicholls, 2011). Nicholls further adds that youth from underprivileged backgrounds are often "outsiders in academia", a space that forces them into the survival strategy of "blending in, passing, and adopting the values of the privileged class they hope to enter". When this strategy fails, underprivileged youth have limited options in terms of where they can turn to for comfort and respite. Even when the strategy of blending in succeeds, the situation of being forced to appear equally-privileged is arguably not a safe experience. Without investigation into whether digital media is an appropriate Safespace, one reality precludes this inquiry: for certain underprivileged youth, digital media may be the only safe space they can access in their lives. The role of digital media as Safespace, either as the negative addiction which further inhibits youth from finding acceptance in society - or, as the positive respite within their reach when struggling with the realities of a competitive society - will benefit from balanced investigation.

The Non-Safespace

Hooks notes that "there can be, and usually is, some degree of pain involved in giving up old ways of thinking", (1994b, p. 43). Freire likewise describes "[discovering [oneself] to be an oppressor may cause considerable anguish, but it does not necessarily lead to solidarity with the oppressed." Here, digital media can play a different role: the Non-Safespace, where underprivileged youth - and their peers - can explore uncomfortable realities in alternative worlds. The pivotal moment of a young individual realizing that they have been part of an oppressive system - contrary to what they have been taught in their lives - is an important fork road. Without support, this realization could lead youth to resort to justifying societal inequality as a quick fix out of this anguish. Digital media presents an alternative space to house these moments, allowing underprivileged youth and privileged youth alike to explore the topic of oppression without direct confrontation over real-world injustices - which the two parties may directly be part of. Digital media serves as the Non-Safespace to soften the initial impact, and perhaps provide second and third chances at realizations of our own involvement in societal oppression. As an example, in the North American classroom setting, engaging white youth together with aboriginal youth on the topic of genocidal policies such as the Indian Wars and residential school can be challenging. This engagement is arguably difficult even for matured adults, as the injustice involves what could be considered a "national crime" (Milloy, 2017). Instead of direct confrontation over potential criminal status of privileged youth, fictional digital media can create multiple learning curves which are less daunting. The Non-Safespace presents an opportunity for iterative learning journeys, serving to help forge emotional connection and collective change between underprivileged youth and their peers.

The Experimental Space

The third aspect of digital media as Experimental Space explores an unsettling reality, often omitted intentionally, but nonetheless observed. Freire and Fanon's discourse on empowerment is not rooted in research settings but real bloodshed and societal oppression of colonized communities. Fanon presents his worry that empowerment will lead the oppressed to wish to oppress their oppressors (2000, p.45). While Fanon presents this as a "confusion" on the part of the underprivileged, Freire explains this as part of past education and conditioning:

> "[…] the oppressed…tend themselves to become oppressors…. The very structure of their thought has been conditioned by the contradictions of the concrete, existential situation by which they were shaped. Their ideal is to be men; but for them, to be men is to be oppressors."

This is not just an issue of revenge, or restorative justice. Rather, it can be seen as the result of the deliberate education underprivileged youth have received from society. Freire details that "[o]ne of the methods of

manipulation [used by the oppressors] is to inoculate individuals with the bourgeois appetite for personal success" (2000). Nicholls echoes that "the bourgeoisie, loyal to and profiting from the status quo, are presented as the model for all classes of society to emulate" (2011). In other words, without intentional intervention, education can default to educating the oppressed to become oppressors.

Complete omission of this consideration assumes that all underprivileged youth, once empowered, will automatically know not to repeat the cycle of oppression. Regardless of what factors lead to this negative outcome, an important reality is worthy of investigation: while oppressors could learn that oppression is wrong by taking part in it, society expects the oppressed to know oppression is wrong by being forced as its victim. Digital media presents an alternative, experimental playground: within its fictional storylines and world building, underprivileged youth have the opportunity to emotionally engage in the perspective of the oppressors - an experience that they are barred from in the real world. Via digital media, the shifting of narrative point-of-view allows room for experimentation and trial-and-error. This may in part explain the rising popularity of role-play (Marchetti, 2021), as individuals gain access to iterative opportunities of different experiences. If experience in itself can lead to knowledge (Freire, 2000), the ability to experiment with different point-of-views via digital media makes each engagement experience a learning opportunity - or, an opportunity for reinvention of the self. Society should not expect underprivileged youth to get everything right the first time; this expectation was not placed on privileged youth. As Freire further notes, the experience of becoming oppressors happens in the "initial stage of the struggle". The existence of an initial stage implies a hopeful long-term future, one that is reached in increments, through experimentation, and with a gradual buildup of new learning opportunities.

In summary, digital media as three spaces presents potential advantages over formal, fact-based tools taking many forms, from massive, university-led open courseware platforms (Carson, 2009) to homework-help videos on YouTube (Kohler & Dietrich, 2021). Firstly, in comparison, fictional digital media involving elements of aesthetics, plot, and world-building may serve as mental health aids and respite from injustices experienced in the real world. Secondly, fictional digital media allows underprivileged youth and their privileged peers an opportunity to engage in uncomfortable topics nested in a fictional, less-confrontational platform. Lastly, fictional digital media presents an opportunity for underprivileged youth to not only see but also experience different perspectives - which can serve to help them identify their true desires for self-actualization in this world. The capacity of digital media to craft considerable casts of oppressed characters for privileged youth to choose from in their self-identification "promote[s] a better understanding of marginalized others, and greater critical social awareness" (Jarvis, 2012). For youth who do not find themselves connected to issues raised in their textbooks, digital media increasingly presents alternative opportunities which emphasize an experience of emotional-engagement, resonance, and immersion (Jennett et al., 2008).

Virtual Realm for Unwelcome Truths

Including underprivileged youth in researching empowerment-education can be an experience inseparable from emotions. From the perspective of positivist research paradigms, emotions are often viewed as external, uncontrolled factors in an environment which mandates perfect control. Conversely, the goal of being inclusive to underprivileged youth in the research process is not for youth to be controlled by the researcher. The participatory action research setting may be one to serve as an alternative space for underprivileged youth to explore their emotions and their unwelcome truths. In his analysis of participatory action research, Kemmis (2006) emphasizes the tradition of *parrhesia* as the important task of bringing bad news to alarm society of an existing problem. Negative emotions present in the research setting can be treated as a form of this *parrhesia*. When an underprivileged youth shares their feelings about circumstances in their lives, the researcher can either choose to eliminate the opportunity, or understand these emotions as a form of an unwelcome truth that sheds light on existing gaps. Likewise, the classroom has not always been a welcoming space for negative emotions from underprivileged youth. Youth, underprivileged or not, are taught to self-censor in formal education settings (Shaull, 2000, p.34). Hooks further describes silence as a response to "the concern that their peers will not like what they say and that this will lead to some form of social punishment" (1994a, p.71). Whereas underprivileged youth are already pressured to "pass" or "blend in" with their privileged peers, self-censorship becomes an even greater stressor if marginalized youth hope to attain social mobility. To benefit from formal research and education, youth are expected to "not…transform the status quo, but to embrace it" (Nicholls, 2011).

Hooks suggests that the educator should not "expect students to take any risks that [we] would not take" (1994b, p.21). In the research setting, an opportunity exists for the creation of a space which not only understands the valid reasons behind the silence of underprivileged youth - but ultimately, a space that presents no risk, no social punishment, and no feeling of being unwelcome. Nicholls adds that creating a space without negative emotions is not equal to creating a safespace. She describes this as "complacency", in contrast, to "do[ing] the hard work of recognizing the pain [from] stretching beyond prescribed social confines" (2011). A thorough willingness to engage with the negative realities underprivileged youth bring into the research setting can help confront real-world problems - ultimately escaping an "empty, romantic" inclusion (Macedo, 2000, p.17) of underprivileged youth.

Social Mobility, Freely Given

Providing financial incentives to participate in research, especially for underprivileged youth, can come with a risk of "coercion". At the same time, the theoretical framework posed by Nicholls acknowledges that the act of participating in formal education itself is a quest of the underprivileged to attain social mobility (2011). This motive is complex and can be assessed from at least two different perspectives. Firstly, it is not necessarily a selfish or impure motive of the underprivileged student. For their privileged peers, this same motive exists. Rather than seeking to use education to escape poverty or ensure survival, privileged students can aim for social mobility with a simple outcome in mind: to acquire more from society than what their family has already acquired. An appropriate view of avoiding coercion should not only protect underprivileged youth as freely consenting participants, but also shield them from unfair attention that treats their motives as different from their privileged peers. Secondly, it can be argued that underprivileged youth are conditioned to possess this motive by society. If they do not seek to attain financial security as a student, they can just as easily be seen as unwilling to help themselves out of poverty. In other words, it is unreasonable to place the blame on disadvantaged students coming into academic settings with the goal of profiting rather than pure learning - when teachers, peers, and other stakeholders in society require this of them in the name of learning to be self-sufficient.

Further, this quest for social mobility often prevents underprivileged youth from learning in a way that helps them rectify the inequalities of society. Social mobility is being withheld from them as a reward, and their job is to prove that they can conform. If a participatory research process for underprivileged youth seeks to present an equal-power relationship, social mobility must not be withheld, but freely given. Withholding the benefits of participating in research can, on its own, form a type of coercion. Ideally, whatever social mobility the researcher hopes to attain in completing the research should also be the social mobility that underprivileged youth can freely access via research. Underprivileged youth deserve to be free from coercion into research; more importantly, they deserve to be free from the inequalities plaguing their lives which give rise to these risks of coercion.

Youth As Creators & Tellers of Their Story

Digital media has the potential to inspire youth towards the creation of their own digital media. For underprivileged youth who face ongoing barriers in accessing education, producing digital media can be an alternative way to share their stories, lived experiences, and knowledge to others. Like how research and a career in academia can become a path for youth (oftentimes privileged youth), digital media has the potential to grow into a career for youth who have this as their occupation of choice. Following the longstanding indigenous practice of oral history as a way to educate future generations (La Clare, 1973), modern digital media can be seen as a continuation of the pre-colonial tradition. Preserved for future viewers in binary code, and encapsulating knowledge that is still brimming with emotions, digital media is a crystallized form of lived experience.

Underprivileged youth who have the opportunity to participate in research may never be granted a pathway to become future researchers. Research, as a platform through which they can teach us about their perspectives on empowerment education, may cease to be accessible to them at some point in their lives. Yet, their knowledge does not diminish over time, instead compounding and deepening with every moment of their lived

experience of marginalization. Perhaps the most significant difference between research and digital media for underprivileged youth is this: unlike in research, youth do not need to be approved before they can be creators.

Conclusion

The use of digital media, particularly fictional digital media towards pedagogy and research methodology may seem paradoxical at first. Knowledge does not appear to be capable of being disseminated via fiction, nor via what is often posited as play, passing-time, entertainment, or even youth-addiction. This paper does not suggest that digital media is incapable of bringing negative influences, but rather considers how society may lean towards devaluing digital media - while allowing oppressed youth limited access to societal resources aside from the freely digital. Society accepts financial costs as a part of accessing formal education, and in a context as such, the only methods of learning left for some oppressed youth may be through informal tools. Digital media thus emerges as a complementary alternative for educators interested in overcoming existing gaps in education equality. As harmful and devalued digital media may be, researchers and educators can choose to reclaim digital media as tools for empowerment - tools that can be accessed, and even passionately self-accessed by youth who face barriers to formal education.

In discussing empowerment education side-by-side with participatory action research, potential similarities may be considered. Education should engage oppressed and privileged students alike as equal-power participants. Beyond mere reception and memorization of knowledge, education can result in action towards tangible changes in society. For youth granted the opportunity to access participatory action research engagements, the experience can likewise be educational to other participants via sharing of perspectives. The mutual learning - and experimental attempts at acting upon society and all its forces of oppression - can both lead to pedagogical experiences unavailable in typical classrooms.

Education and research settings have similarly sought to diminish the role of emotions in this sharing of knowledge. Regardless of whether this removal of emotion is performed to protect the mental health of students or the purity of science, oppressed youth may be left with no acceptable outlet for emotions arising from everyday oppression. The result is academic engagement that does not attempt to be immersive nor fully accepting. Diminishing emotion effectively deprives youth of opportunities for a deeper state of mental health, in which negative feelings are not conveniently erased but intentionally overcome. In situations where systems of education and research cannot be quickly adapted to house emotions, digital media with all its storytelling and world-building may assist in providing useful alternative space. If this potential is successfully utilized to both acknowledge and overcome negative emotions in the lives of oppressed youth, digital media may serve to arm youth with new resilience to fortify their future fights against oppression. All tools with the potential to assist youth in finding equality and humanity are worth our consideration. With this, digital media emerges as a potential channel towards Freire's vision.

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