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Digital Media and Learning Course: A Critical Reflection

Digital Media & Learning (EME6347) began with a simple premise, things could be different. From the opening module (Module Zero), the course framed education as part of a broader sociotechnical system of control, rather than a neutral mechanism for delivering content. Drawing on Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and *The Act of Study*, students were encouraged to view schooling as a technology capable of reproducing inequality as readily as challenging it (Freire, 1970). This framing influenced not only what we read but also how the course itself was structured. Instead of a traditional, instructor-driven online class, we worked as a community, with the professor guiding discussions as needed and providing foundational course content. Activities included collaborative annotation in Hypothes.is, synthesis discussions on Discord, and optional weekly synchronous sessions with the professor.

In my opinion, the modules progressed in an almost deliberate sequence. Module One introduced readings from Marx, Winner, and Selwyn, positioning technology as a sociotechnical arrangement filled with politics and power, rather than as a neutral tool (Marx, 1867/1976; Selwyn, 2011; Winner, 1980). Module Two examined the history of teaching machines and the parallels between behaviorist and constructionist approaches to learning through works by Ferster, Watters, and Papert (Ferster, 2014; Papert, 1993; Watters, 2021). Module Three invited us to imagine alternatives beyond current schooling systems, by reading works from Illich, Kahn & Kellner. Module Four connected these ideas to the Connected Learning framework and the HOMAGO (Hanging Out, Messing Around, and Geeking Out) research. These frameworks emphasized interest-driven, peer-supported learning (Illich, 1971; Ito et al., 2013; Kahn & Kellner, 2007). Module Five challenged "silver bullet" and "quick fix" thinking. It did this by highlighting how schools often fixate on new tools rather than systemic issues. This was also highlighted in Sims' critique and Boyd's work on "networked publics", surveillance, and moral panics (Boyd, 2014; Sims, 2017). Finally, Module Six turned toward AI, machine learning, and large language models, featuring a few papers on AI critiques.

In this paper, I examine the main elements and experiences of the course through the lens of the core readings and conceptual frameworks we read and discussed. I also analyze where the course's teachings and practices clearly aligned, and where they diverged, from the concepts and frameworks presented in those readings. This examination offers a perspective on how the course

both enacted and struggled with the very questions it invited us to consider about technology, power, and the future of education.

Core Concepts and Frameworks: Education, Technology, and Power

The course began with Freire's concepts. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he characterizes "banking education" through stark oppositions. These oppositions are: the teacher knows everything while students know nothing; the teacher speaks while students listen; the teacher determines the content while students gratefully receive it (Freire, 1970). Against this model, Freire proposes problem-posing education. In this form of education, teachers and students are grounded in dialogue, mutual inquiry, and critical consciousness (Freire, 1970). *The Act of Study* extends this view by treating study as an active, collective process of exploration of texts/readings and the world, rather than passively receiving information.

To study, in this sense, is to interrogate and question the things being presented and learned, not merely memorize them. With these readings in the course so far, we were expected to validate our understanding through shared annotations, Discord conversations, and reflective writing, rather than simply demonstrating compliance with the reading requirements.

Module 1 extended this political framing into technology. Winner's question, "Do artifacts have politics?", offered a way to think about tools as embedded in social arrangements rather than neutral instruments (Winner, 1980). An example of this includes low overpasses that prevented buses, and thus many marginalized residents, from reaching certain beaches. This is an example that structural arrangements can systematically advantage some groups over others. Marx's analysis of machinery in the factory setting offers another insight. In this example, he states that machines centralize control over the labor process and dictate the pace of work, which results in the deskilling of workers. Eventually, the workers become "appendages of the machine" (Marx, 1867/1976). Selwyn (2011) also warned that educational technologies often reproduce existing inequalities, by embedding assumptions about "ideal learners," appropriate behavior, and legitimate knowledge. Together, these readings position technology as not merely devices, but arrangements of people, practices, institutions, and artifacts that stabilize particular power relations (sociotechnical).

Module 2 contrasted behaviorism and constructionism. Ferster recounts B. F. Skinner's teaching machines, which framed learning as a sequence of small, measurable responses to prompts, optimized for efficiency and control (Ferster, 2014). In this model, learning is defined by observable correct answers, with the machine controlling pacing, feedback, and allowable paths. Watters (2021) shows how similar logics persist in contemporary edtech systems that promise "personalized

learning." Papert (1993), by contrast, advocates for constructionism, where learning happens as students build projects that matter to them. Rather than treating technology as a faster way to deliver content, Papert frames computers as tools learners can use to think with, explore ideas, and create based on their own interests and contexts.

In Modules 3 and 4, *Deschooling Society*, by Illich (1971) critiques practices such as compulsory attendance, age-grading, and credential requirements, arguing that schools monopolize what counts as legitimate learning and tie access to jobs and status to institutional certificates. He proposes alternatives like "learning webs," where people connect directly with others who share their interests or expertise, outside school structures. Kahn and Kellner (2007) link Freire and Illich to contemporary debates about computers and networks, contending that critical pedagogy must address not only classroom practices but also how educational institutions and technologies reproduce existing hierarchies. Ito and colleagues' HOMAGO framework provides ethnographic examples of youg people hanging out on MySpace, experimenting with digital video, or geeking out in anime fan communities (Ito et al., 2010). The Connected Learning framework translates these observations into design principles. For example, programs like YOUmedia Chicago, connect teens' interests in hip-hop or digital media production with mentors, peer communities, and academic or civic opportunities (Ito et al., 2013). Gee's (2004) concept of "affinity spaces" reinforces this perspective as well, with examples from video game fan forums and modding communities, where learning occurs through participation and shared tools rather than formal instruction.

Modules 5 and 6 turned toward the politics of innovation and AI. Sims (2017), in his study of the Downtown School, describes scenes of "innovation" functioning more as performance for adults than as transformative learning for students. One example was a boy coding at a desk while journalists and visitors watched. This scene really just showed an image of progress, but was there any actual innovation or general progress by the student body? Sims uses "disruptive fixation" to name how civic leaders, funders, and media become obsessed with new technologies and reform narratives while underlying inequalities remain untouched.

Boyd (2014) documents how adult fears about youth and the internet, around predators, sexting, or "screen addiction", often lead to responses emphasizing surveillance and control rather than critical digital literacy. There were multiple papers to read on AI. I chose to read *The Uncontroversial "Thingness" of AI* by Lucy Suchman. Suchman (2023) pushes the conversation into AI by questioning how "AI" has come to be treated as a single, coherent "thing." She cites, for example, the Center on Privacy & Technology at Georgetown Law's decision to stop using labels like "AI" and "machine learning," arguing that such terms obscure the specific data practices, infrastructures, and

institutional interests involved. Treating AI as monolithic, she contends, hides the human labor, data extraction, and political choices that make these systems possible.

These core readings framed the course as an exercise in learning to see technologies, and educational practices themselves, as contested, political, and historically situated. Additional sources I've read deepen this perspective as well. Gee (2004) elaborates how learning unfolds in non-school affinity spaces, such as gaming communities. Raffaghelli et al. (2020) argue that students and educators need critical data literacies to interrogate learning analytics and data-driven systems, not merely use them. Atenas and Havemann (2015) show how open data projects, when designed thoughtfully, can support participatory, justice-oriented learning rather than reproduce expertise. Cox (2024) ties these concerns together by arguing that "responsible generative AI literacy" requires understanding how systems are trained, their limitations, and their embedding within institutional logics. Collectively, these works reinforce the course's central insight, digital media and educational technologies are never neutral tools, they are part of broader struggles over whose interests are served, whose knowledge counts, and what futures remain possible.

Alignment with the Core Concepts

One of the clearest alignments between theory and practice in this course was the use of Hypothes.is for collective annotation. Rather than reading alone, we annotated with comments and questions directly onto the texts. This practice aligned with Freire's insistence that reading is always also "reading the world" and that understanding emerges through dialogue rather than just transmission (Freire, 1970). The course also went against the banking model.

At the same time, annotating the readings also worked as a small example of critical data literacy in action. Raffaghelli et al. (2020) argue that higher education should not just use data to track or measure students, but also help learners understand how data is created and how it can shape power, inclusion, and exclusion. In this course, our annotations were not just comments, they became data themselves, saved online, reusable, and potentially visible beyond the end of the class.

Discord, meanwhile, operated as an affinity space, mirroring the concepts described by Ito et al. (2013) and Gee (2004). The different channels within the DML Discord group, such as #concepts, #logistics, #random, and weekly synthesis discussion channels, supported different modes of participation. For example, we used them to get help with technical issues in the course, introduce ourselves to group members, discuss theories and concepts in the class (via synthesis discussions) find real-world examples, and talk through our understanding of the content for that week. In

synthesis discussions, we also connected the readings to other real-world examples/current debates and considered how authors such as Boyd, Sims, Winner, and Selwyn might interpret these events. This structure of the course aligns with the Connected Learning framework (Ito et al., 2013) and resonates with Gee's description of affinity spaces where participants "share a common endeavor" and learn by contributing to ongoing practices rather than listening passively (Gee, 2004).

The overall course design also embodied Illich's and Freire's critiques of schooling by minimizing lecture, relying on peer coordination, and positioning Discord as the central hub. There was a clear expectation that we would help each other, share resources, and negotiate norms collaboratively. This approach mirrored Illich's call for learning webs outside formal institutions (Illich, 1971), even though we remained within a university course. It also aligned with Kahn and Kellner's (2007) argument that critical pedagogy must rethink both classroom practice and the broader social role of schooling in the context of new technologies.

Finally, the course invited us to apply these frameworks to our own contexts and professions. Working in a non-teaching role at the university student center, where I support student organizations and help plan their events, I reframed how I see both the building and my role. The space, and my work within it, is now viewed as supporting affinity spaces and connected learning environments, a place to study, gather, and host events. Student leaders informally teach one another event planning, budgeting, communication, and leadership as they organize programs together. These practices resemble Ito's HOMAGO model and Gee's affinity space dynamics (Gee, 2004; Ito et al., 2013). Seeing my day-to-day work through this lens was one of the most concrete ways the course shifted how I understand learning in a professional context.

Misalignment with the Core Concepts: Tensions, Contradictions, and Constraints

At the same time, the course could not fully escape the sociotechnical system it was critiquing. One clear misalignment was our dependence on corporate and institutional platforms. While we discussed surveillance, privacy, and institutional politics, our own work unfolded inside tools like Discord, Microsoft Teams, and the university's systems. Raffaghelli et al. (2020) describe how higher education increasingly operates within "data cultures," where students' and educators' digital traces are logged, analyzed, and sometimes monetized or used for institutional decision-making. In that sense, the course encouraged critical reflection on education, power, and technology while being housed on platforms that participate in many of the same controversial concepts we were analyzing.

The community aspect was helpful, but faulty at times. Discord functioned as an affinity space, yet participation varied. Some students posted frequently, shared resources, and advanced conceptual connections, while others engaged minimally. Gee (2004) observes that affinity spaces differ in inclusivity depending on norms and newcomer support, while Ito et al. (2013) emphasize that access to connected learning opportunities is shaped by broader inequalities in time, resources, and confidence. More structured small-group check-ins might strengthen that community feel in future iterations of the course. The course encouraged authentic engagement, but could not guarantee it. It was designed that way, but the reality reflected differences in comfort with critical theory, digital tools, and synchronous interaction.

Finally, an unavoidable institutional constraint remained, this was still a graded university course. Illich's project of deschooling, Freire's vision of revolutionary praxis, and the Connected Learning agenda all grapple with structures that extend beyond any single class. The course worked hard to pull away the structures and supports, yet could not eliminate credit hours, deadlines, grading, or program requirements. Kahn and Kellner (2007) argue that critical pedagogy must navigate this paradox, striving for transformative change within systems that often resist it. In this sense, the course resembled a carefully designed experiment operating inside a larger institution whose basic rules were still firmly in place.

Conclusion

Digital Media & Learning did more than assign readings on critical pedagogy, sociotechnical systems, and AI, it sought to embody those principles in its design. The use of Hypothes.is and Discord, the emphasis on peer-driven synthesis, and the professor's decision to step back from traditional lecturing aligned with Freire's problem-posing education. It also aligned with Illich's critique of schooling, and the Connected Learning framework's focus on interest-driven, peer-supported networks (Freire, 1970; Illich, 1971; Ito et al., 2013). The course also created space for deep engagement with the politics of technology. The readings included Winner's notion of artifacts with politics and Selwyn's critical stance on edtech, as well as Sims' critique of disruptive fixations (Selwyn, 2011; Sims, 2017; Winner, 1980).

Yet, the course never fully escaped the conditions it critiqued. It relied on corporate platforms embedded in data-driven cultures (Raffaghelli et al., 2020), demanded significant labor within contexts of unequal time and energy, and operated under institutional logics of grading and credit.

The challenge now is to carry this critical lens into everyday practice without overwhelming students or educators. Scholars such as Raffaghelli et al. (2020), Atenas et al. (2024), Picasso et al. (2024), and Cox (2024) argue that building critical data and AI literacies is less about adding new content

and more about reframing existing practices. This includes making invisible processes visible, naming power, and inviting learners to question rather than simply adapt and go with the flow. In that sense, this course achieved its core intention. It introduced key concepts and shifted how learning and technology are understood, while also revealing the institutional limits of trying to do this kind of critical work from within the system.

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