Digital critical pedagogy: A collaborative narrative literature review

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Digital critical pedagogy: A collaborative narrative literature review

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At the intersection of an ongoing global pandemic and equity-focused social movements, critical and digital pedagogies became both necessary and important. Digital ways of teaching made education possible when we could not be in person, and provided alternative modes of learning and thinking, while exacerbating existing inequalities. In this project, we engage in a narrative literature review to examine how digital critical pedagogy (DCP) has been encountered and framed in higher education pedagogy research from 2020-2022. We ask the question: How is DCP being defined, operationalized, and enacted in the emerging research literature? We argue that the analysis of DCP is essential work, as there is no normal to which we can return, no undoing of the alternative, digital modes of teaching and learning that have been discovered or extended, and no moral path forward without continuing to confront existing systemic, educational injustices.

Keywords: digital tools, critical pedagogy, technology, social media, equity, online learning, online teaching
Introduction

Digital critical pedagogy (DCP) is an emerging key term in the pedagogy and practice of education and other academic disciplines. Teachers and scholars’ examination of intersections between the critical and the digital has become urgent in recent years. In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced an unprecedented number of higher education institutions around the world into new or expanded digital pedagogies. Because social distancing was the most effective way to stop the spread of the virus, universities quickly transitioned to remote learning. In the United States, this occurred for most universities after an extended spring break during which ad hoc trainings about teaching online were conducted, and instructors attempted to transition all course materials to the digital environment. For the next year, many universities continued with some mixture of online, in-person, and hybrid instruction as the pandemic continued. Instructors created materials while simultaneously developing and honing strategies to support student learning in both practical and critical ways.

Concurrent with digital pedagogy’s growth during the pandemic, other societal events of 2020 highlighted the need for critical pedagogy. In May 2020, George Floyd, an unarmed Black man from Minneapolis, was killed by a police officer. The murder of George Floyd sparked nationwide protests, and the Black Lives Matter movement gained momentum. Even during the pandemic, both in the United States and around the world, thousands protested police brutality and anti-Black racism. At the intersection of an ongoing global pandemic and equity-focused movements, critical and digital pedagogies became both necessary and important. The digital, thrust upon university faculties to make education possible, provided alternative modes of learning, thinking, and being while at the same time exacerbating existing inequities.

As an emerging term and pedagogical practice, DCP has been used inconsistently in the literature. Research has used keywords like digital, online, and internet-based alongside keywords like critical, power, and agency. This project examines how these articles have coalesced around the framework of DCP, even when they haven’t used that term explicitly. The current study brings clarity and consistency to the conversation around digital technologies and critical pedagogy. A group of researchers at Middlesex University in the United Kingdom, led by Mona Sakr, began examining DCP as an emerging term in the literature. Publishing a white paper in 2021, Sakr and Hyder examined the literature using a collaborative literature review. They and their colleagues collectively developed a set of keywords and databases to search for any articles published between 2011 and 2021. Their project yielded several themes that defined DCP, including digitally mediated dialogue, interweaving with public pedagogies, conceptualizing and creating a “safe space” online, expanding definitions of digital inclusion, and taking pedagogical risks.

Continuing to explore tensions between digital pedagogy and inequities, the current study builds on Sakr’s initial report. At a conference in 2021, Sakr called on other education researchers to continue this work. As a group of faculty at Xavier University, we took up Sakr’s call. The present study utilized a collaborative, narrative literature review of articles published between 2020 and 2022. Recognizing that educators were beginning to approach DCP research within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the #BlackLivesMatter movement, our goal was to examine the state of the literature. Our work here furthers the conversation started by Sakr and
Hyder by defining DCP within an American context two years after Sakr and Hyder published their findings. We argue that DCP is essential, as there is no normal to which we can return, no undoing of the alternative modes of teaching and learning discovered or extended, and no moral path forward without continuing to confront historical and systemic injustice.

This project also takes up the call from the President of the American Educational Research Association, Rich Milner, to make 2022 the “year of the literature review” by interrogating “what research has been consequential” and “from where does this research develop and evolve over time” (2022). These are central questions for education researchers working in the area of DCP. Scholars and practitioners are wrestling with the term, exploring what it means in various fields and contexts, and contesting definitions deployed in scholarly literature, Silicon Valley, and the public, especially because of the pandemic-related increase in technology use. Our article clarifies the inquiry into and investigation of technology and power in the classroom by more fully explicating aspects of DCP. Ultimately, this study asks: How is DCP being defined, operationalized, and enacted in publications from 2020-2022 that higher education used to adapt to the pandemic classroom?

**Theoretical Framework: Critical Pedagogy and Digital Pedagogy**

Critical Pedagogy has its roots in the work of Paolo Freire, a Brazilian educator who saw education as a practice of freedom from oppression rather than simply the absorption of content. His foundational work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), rejects the banking model of education, which sees students as empty vessels for the teacher to fill with knowledge. That model, he argues, reproduces societal inequalities rather than challenging them. Scholars such as hooks (1994) and Giroux (1988) advocate a critical pedagogy that addresses the oppressive social realities of students with the goal of liberating them from these realities. In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994), hooks use Freire’s work to consider how education as self-actualization, as opposed to the filling of a pail, can combat sexism and racism in higher education in the United States. One way Giroux (1988) believes that schools can become emancipatory is by illuminating the hidden curriculum that is so often present. He calls on critical educators to recognize that “the language of efficiency and control promotes obedience rather than critique” (Giroux, 1988, p. 4).

Kincheloe (2008) synthesizes the extensive writing on critical pedagogy by defining it through the following principles:

- “grounded on a social and educational vision of justice and equality” (p. 6).
- “constructed on the belief that education is inherently political” (p. 8).
- “dedicated to the alleviation of human suffering” (p. 11).
- Teachers as researchers, intellectuals, and activists.
- “Social change and cultivating the intellect” go hand in hand (p. 21).

The move to digital educational environments has been happening for several decades. Though previous distance learning occurred through correspondence courses, the introduction of more efficient communication technologies transformed distance learning beginning in the 1970s (Simonson et al., 2019). In the 1980s, personal computers were introduced in classrooms, and by
the 1990s, Bill Clinton called for every classroom to be connected to the Internet (Dorning, 1996). As digital technologies entered classrooms, digital pedagogies followed. This study considers the ways in which critical pedagogy can be enacted through the digital, particularly due to the swift increase in uses of digital pedagogies and online learning prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Method

Researchers use systematic literature reviews and narrative literature reviews (sometimes referred to as non-systematic reviews) to examine and synthesize many research studies on the same topic. Systematic reviews include approaches like meta-analyses, which combine quantitative data from many studies and then analyze that combined data through statistical models. Instead, the current study employs a narrative literature review process to examine DCP. Narrative literature reviews “identify a research area in need of review, identify inclusion criteria for studies, select studies that meet the inclusion criteria, identify themes that emerge from the set of studies, and draw conclusions” (Rumrill and Fitzgerald, 2001, pg. 168). For example, Bennett, Driver, and Trent (2019) use a narrative literature review approach to answer the question, “How have researchers in teacher education addressed the concept of White privilege in relation to training prospective White teachers to work in urban schools?” (p. 893). In contrast to systematic reviews, both Ferrari (2015) and Rumrill and Fitzgerald (2001) argue that a strength of narrative reviews is their ability to chart the development of a concept, principle, or theory over time. This makes the narrative literature approach particularly well suited to examine the emergence and current state of DCP as a term. Narrative methodologies emphasize process and emergence. Using a narrative review approach allows us to emphasize the emerging nature of DCP as a term. Using a systematic approach would be difficult because authors have used the DCP term inconsistently throughout the literature; therefore, a systematic review would not be able to capture the entirety of the emerging conversation around DCP. Using a narrative review approach allows us to foreground the term’s emergence.

Data Collection

During Spring 2022, a group of 12 interdisciplinary faculty at Xavier University came together in a Faculty Learning Community (FLC). Following Sakr and Hyder’s (2021) model, FLC members worked collaboratively to define the search parameters for this narrative literature review, independently reading selected articles and then providing their thoughts on emergent themes. FLC members narrowed the search to focus on digital and critical pedagogy articles published during the past three years (January 2020-March 2022). These dates enabled us to extend Sakr and Hyder’s study, which examined articles from 2011 through 2021. Our study utilizes a shorter timeframe than Sakr and Hyder’s to facilitate a deeper dive into the current research and accommodate an explosion of research that happened within those three years. Our study overlaps one year with Sakr and Hyder’s study, ensuring that we didn’t miss any research between the two studies. Ultimately, our goal was to take a snapshot of the state of research on DCP at our current moment, after the rush to online, pandemic teaching.

FLC members developed a list of search terms to identify articles discussing digital critical pedagogy (Table 1) and searched these terms across three databases: Humanities International
Complete, Education Research Complete (to review education research), and Communication and Mass Media Complete (to review digital media, internet, and media studies-related research). FLC members then developed a list of one to five journals in their fields that would most likely publish articles about DCP (Table 2). The terms were also searched in each of the 16 journals. The search was performed during February and March 2022. Articles reflected a variety of methodological orientations (qualitative, quantitative, humanities). Articles were excluded if they were in a language other than English (due to the language limitations of the FLC members), not peer reviewed, or focused solely on K-12 education. The final review included 28 articles (organized in Table 3).

Table 1.
Search Terms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Search Terms</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>digital critical pedagogy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>critical digital pedagogy</td>
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<tr>
<td>feminist digital pedagogy</td>
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<tr>
<td>equality AND digital pedagogy</td>
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<tr>
<td>inclusion AND digital pedagogy</td>
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<td>diversity AND digital pedagogy</td>
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<td>Black Lives Matter AND digital pedagogy</td>
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<td>bell hooks AND digital pedagogy</td>
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<td>critical pedagogy AND digital pedagogy</td>
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<tr>
<td>dialogue AND digital pedagogy</td>
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<tr>
<td>antiracism AND digital pedagogy</td>
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<tr>
<td>queer AND digital pedagogy</td>
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<tr>
<td>asynchronous AND critical pedagogy</td>
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<tr>
<td>decolonization AND digital pedagogy</td>
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Table 2.
Journals

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<tr>
<th>Journals</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Educational Technology Research &amp; Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Internet and Higher Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal of the Learning Sciences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal of Athletic Training Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Internet Journal of Allied Health Sciences and Practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Reading Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Journal of the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Journal of the APNA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practical Theology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching Theology &amp; Religion</td>
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<tr>
<td>Religion and Education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Analysis

In developing our themes, FLC members familiarized themselves with our chosen articles. Each member of the research team independently read and re-read a selection of our chosen articles, taking detailed notes and highlighting key information for initial analysis. FLC members met three times to discuss articles and distill themes during spring 2022. Through collaborative discussion and examination of our independent codes, initial themes emerged. To generate initial themes, each FLC member added their notes and codes to a shared document, making notes of segments that seemed to convey a particular idea or concept. We ensured consistency in interpreting the articles by assigning at least two FLC members (sometimes more) to each article and holding regular meetings to compare, contrast, and refine our article analysis.

During these discussions, two charts (Figures 1 and 2) were created by two different members of the FLC and used by the whole team as tools to flesh out the themes across articles. While the development of themes worked to identify discrete ideas in the literature, the two figures (Figures 1 and 2) worked to synthesize the themes and help us consider how the themes connected with and related to one another. These charts were not, however, a summary of the themes, nor were they meant to be inclusive of all themes. They were tools for use within the narrative literature review, as a way of capturing the evolving understanding of the authors as we met to discuss and determine the themes. When concepts from these figures emerged as part of one or more themes, we note that in the Results section.

![Figure 1. Organization of DCP](image-url)
Figure 2. Contrast between uncritical pedagogy and DCP

Theme Refinement

As Ferarri (2015) has noted, “Drafting [a narrative literature review] text rarely follows a linear pathway, as it is a dynamic process” (pg. 233). As the FLC worked to refine the major themes found in the articles, they appreciated the truth in Ferrari’s statement. In the search for themes, patterns within the initial analysis of the articles emerged. In the summer of 2022, FLC leaders Lauren Angelone and Ashley Hinck reviewed the shared document of notes and analysis created by the FLC over the previous year and grouped codes and notes together, forming potential themes.

This initial set of eight themes was then reviewed by each member of the FLC individually and as a community. During the theme review phase, the FLC meticulously reviewed each proposed theme, ensuring each theme was cohesive and distinctive. Themes that were too similar were combined, and those that were multifaceted were divided. In the phase of defining and naming themes, we provided clear definitions and specific names for each theme to offer insight into the essence of each thematic finding. Clear criteria, grounded in the articles reviewed, were established for each theme, ensuring the themes accurately and comprehensively represented the data.

Finally, in organizing the data within each theme, we selected compelling and illustrative data excerpts to include within each thematic section, adding depth and richness to the themes. This extensive, collaborative process by a multi-disciplinary team ensured the reliability and validity of our thematic development and contributed to the robustness of our research findings. As other researchers have found, this iterative process was a crucial part of the narrative literature review (Juntunen and Lehenkari, 2021, pg. 340).
Results

After completing the database searches, we found 28 articles that met our inclusion criteria (n = 28). Through reading and discussion within the FLC, several overlapping themes emerged related to the concept of DCP, along with a theoretical frame. As a complement to the work of Sakr and Hyder (2021), which intentionally identified more concrete digital critical classroom applications in support of their local DEI context, our FLC took a step back, noticing discourses within which DCP practices are embedded and enacted, with practices becoming instances of these discourses in action. The review revealed that, first and foremost, technology is not neutral, and this theoretical frame undergirds the themes that follow. To avoid an instrumentalist view and implementation of educational tools, educators must recognize that technology impacts instruction in both intended and unintended ways. Remaining open to the possibilities presented by technological tools while maintaining a healthy skepticism of those tools should prevent educators from enacting a neutral, instrumentalist view.

With that framing in mind, we assert that DCP:

1. Humanizes education by leveraging technology to disrupt hegemonic power structures of oppression present in classrooms.
2. Assumes that digital technology is already embedded across social systems, and therefore should be integral to classroom life.
3. Fundamentally requires equitable access, training, resources, and experience.
4. Engages questions of publicity and privacy in educational spaces.
5. Critiques, transforms, and reshapes course content, digital technologies, and students’ worldviews.
6. Builds literacies, and professional and civic skills.

Collectively, these themes form this study’s definition of DCP: a critical and ideological stance toward teaching with technology, which assumes that technology is not neutral, creating possibilities around classroom power, agency, and content, especially in the shadows of the pandemic. For DCP to be fully and equitably enacted, educators must recognize that technology use is a literacy and a form of civic engagement that requires resources, explicit training, and critique.

The following sections detail the themes. We discuss the articles that contribute to each theme, looking at how the literature around DCP has developed. Table 3 includes a summary of our themes and the articles that support our findings.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Number of articles associated with the theme</th>
<th>Associated articles</th>
<th>Context in DCP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theme 1: Humanizes education by leveraging technology to disrupt hegemonic power structures of oppression present in classrooms</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Barber (2020), Block (2021), Keshvarz (2020), Adu (2021), Meri-Yilan (2020)</td>
<td>-Transforms the distribution of power -Promotes greater sense of community -Students exercising greater agency in own learning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Students can leverage digital tools in diverse ways in educational spaces. Technology is not inherently empowering for students; requires a critical perspective. DCP provides a vehicle for students to consider themselves and their place in the world.

### Theme 2: Assumes that digital technology is already embedded across social systems, and therefore should be integral to classroom life.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 6    | Yoon (2021)  
Traester et al. (2021)  
Amanova (2021)  
Baroud & Dharamshi (2021)  
Block (2020) |

- Rebutts the assumption that because media is present in society, it is naturally embedded in classrooms.
- Troubles notion of technology as an additive or option in classrooms.
- DCP can transform a classroom and is an essential element to education; digital tools are linked to our lives and can empower students to be active participants in the classroom.

### Theme 3: Fundamentally requires equitable access, training, resources, and experience.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 5    | Baroud & Dharamshi (2021)  
Dlamini & Ndzinisa (2020)  
Rodés et al. (2021)  
Swerzenski (2021)  
Williamson et al. (2020) |

- We cannot assume access, training, or resources for digital practices are inherently present in classrooms.
- Both students and teachers are impacted by lack of access, training, and resources, particularly during the COVID-19 Pandemic.
- A need for ongoing professional development for teachers.
- Access and resources do not equate to training; a reflective space for teachers is necessary to implement DCP in the classroom.
- DCP calls for an inclusive environment that promotes equity and justice.

### Theme 4: Engages questions of publicity and privacy in educational spaces.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 7    | Papacharissi (2010)  
Block (2021)  
Amanova (2021)  
Traester et al. (2021)  
Mertala (2020) |

- DCP troubles the public and private notions of the digital.
- DCP interrogates how digital technologies can expand what might be private classroom work into semi-public or public artefacts.

### Theme 5: Critiques, transforms, and reshapes course content, digital technologies, and students’ worldviews.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>References</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| 10   | Brennan et al. (2021)  
Montelongo & Eaton (2020)  
Warr & Sampson (2020)  
Baroud and Dharamshi (2020) |

- DCP opens up possibilities for teaching, knowing, and being.
- Digital tools are inherently non-neutral, especially when power differentials are not illuminated.
- Technologies offer potential to...
Theme #1: DCP Humanizes Education by Leveraging Technology to Disrupt Hegemonic Power Structures of Oppression Present in Classrooms

DCP transforms the distribution of power in the classroom, re-envisioning the relationships between students and teachers while cultivating agency in students. As noted in Figure 2, uncritical pedagogy reifies traditional hegemonic power structures in the classroom, ones in which the values of the dominant group are left unquestioned (Kincheloe, 2008). DCP challenges these structures, providing opportunities for greater equity and shared power. For many authors in the reviewed literature, DCP offers the opportunity to employ digital tools toward a liberatory end. By foregrounding ways that digital tools can invite more student co-creation of learning, DCP challenges the banking model of education (Freire, 1970).

Digital tools can facilitate a humanizing pedagogy by providing opportunities for students to build knowledge together through tools such as synchronous video, as shown in Figure 1. These tools can distribute power and agency, allowing teachers to easily survey class opinions or preferences, create a living syllabus with input from students, and, through apps like Google Docs, share in-course content creation. For example, Barber (2020) described a “digital moments” exercise used to promote community in an online class. She contended that the greater sense of community led to student ownership of learning, a level playing field between students and teachers, and an increased willingness to respectfully challenge the instructor and other students. Similarly, Block (2021) argued that digital tools can transform a graduate course “into a shared learning community in and outside of the classroom” (p. 371), and Rodés et al. (2021) described their efforts to develop a MOOC that enacted a Pedagogy of Care.

In addition to providing opportunities to build learning communities, digital tools, when used with a critical lens, may offer opportunities for students to exercise greater agency in their own learning. Keshvarz (2020), for example, found that students in an online class developed stronger information literacy skills than those in the same course taught in person. He argued that online education allowed students to assume greater responsibility for and control over their own learning. Adu (2021) also used student-created wikis, virtual reality, and WhatsApp to promote empowered learning among students at a university in Ghana. Furthermore, DCP humanizes education by leveraging digital tools to provide students with diverse ways of being in the
educational space. Tools such as discussion boards (Meri-Yilan, 2020; Swerenski, 2020), recorded synchronous video discussions (Warr & Sampson, 2020), social video sharing platforms (e.g., Flipgrid; Mehta and Aguilera, 2020), and multimodal presentations (Wright, 2020) offered students a variety of modalities to express their ideas and identities. However, Mehta and Aguilera (2020) cautioned that educators must pay attention to how technologies can reinforce inequality and oppression for some students, even while providing humanizing experiences for others. DCP understands that technology is not inherently empowering for students; to use digital tools in humanizing ways requires a critical perspective. In some cases, authors worried that digital media might enable schools and teachers to further entrench themselves in the banking model (Freire, 1970), using video and LMS to simply push content “downstream” (Swerzenski, 2021; Williamson et al., 2020, p. 112). Witzenburger and Gulson (2021) argued that in cases like these, EdTech (i.e., the industry that develops, sells, and implements technology in schools) transforms the student into a “datafied subject” without agency.

Snir (2021) and O’Halloran (2020) moved the discussion to the theoretical, examining the technology from post-critical and post-humanist perspectives respectively. Snir (2021) used the work of Walter Benjamin to consider how school itself functions as a technology. In school, students are presented with copies of various parts of the world to which they would not normally have access. Because these copies are reproduced without an “aura” of distance and authority, they allow students to reconsider them – and thus the world itself – critically. The reproductive ability of digital technologies strengthens this tendency, according to Snir. O’Halloran (2020) decentered the human user of the technology through posthumanism and a Deleuzian rhizomatic pedagogy that gives agency to the technology itself. Ultimately, O’Halloran challenged educators to promote learning via interactions with technology that may not follow prescribed or foreseeable paths. He pointed out the error of “talk[ing] commonly about software ‘tools’ as though the software and the data it generates are always under our agency” (p. 850).

Theme #2: DCP Assumes that Digital Technology Is Already Embedded Across Social Systems, and Therefore Should Be Integral to Classroom Life

DCP involves the assumption that digital media are already “a core environment in our daily lives” (Yoon, 2021, p. 183) and, therefore, should also be part of our classrooms. If classrooms reflect the world around us, it follows that the digital would be part of higher education classrooms. For example, Traester et al. (2021) argued that the critical thinking and reading skills they helped students build through digital annotation are essential in “confronting the demands of information in the digital age” (pg. 347). Similarly, Amanova (2021) argued that teaching about feminism requires teaching about digital technologies in the age of social media activism.

This theme also engages questions of whether using digital media in teaching is additive or optional. Indeed, in the current literature review, digital media is seen as essential and unavoidable—an inextricable part of our world and our classrooms. For example, Baroud and Dharamshi (2021) wrote,
The significant shift would encourage teacher educators and teacher candidates alike to consider meaningful integrations of critical digital literacies into the curriculum rather than treating it as an add-on or an optional topic to be addressed. Such a paradigm shift would encourage educators to consider thinking critically, ethically, and responsibly and design literacy learning opportunities that respond to institutional, social, and economic contexts and needs (Hobbs, 2010). (p. 179)

Block (2020) described how digital media and corresponding digital history methods have transformed graduate seminars and disciplinary content on colonial history:

Thus, the now unremarkable fact of digitally accessible readings can transform standard graduate practices. It moves beyond an ‘add X and stir’ approach to colonial North American history by centering the goal of understanding the place of colonial America in wider processes of empire building and settler colonialism (p. 380).

From this perspective, DCP is essential to education. Because digital tools are inextricably linked to teachers and students' daily lives, they must help students engage the tools both to encourage digital literacy and to empower students’ active participation in the classroom. Figure 1 illustrates how our group thought through some of the critiques and possibilities of teaching in a digital world. As the Figure states, there is no return to a pre-pandemic "normal."

**Theme #3: DCP Fundamentally Requires Equitable Access, Training, Resources, and Experience**

DCP was a crucial lens for understanding and assessing best practices in education during and after the pandemic. Higher education faculty cannot view this pedagogical approach from a digital native perspective (Prensky, 2001), which often assumes that comfort with using digital technologies for communication and entertainment easily translates into facility with similar technologies in a classroom context. DCP reminds us that not every teacher and every student already possesses the digital media skills necessary to teach with and learn from digital technologies. We must also consider that not everyone has an entrée to technology and confront the challenges of equitable access. A consistent theme across reviewed articles was that digital technologies are complex and as such require resources, access, training, and experience for both teachers and students.

For teachers and even teacher candidates who are learning about digital tools, professional development and other support may be necessary (Baroud & Dharamshi, 2020; Dlamini & Ndzinisa, 2020; Rodés et al., 2021; Swerzenski, 2021). In particular, Baroud & Dharamshi (2020) argued,

Ongoing professional development is needed not only to familiarize teacher candidates with effective tools for engaging in critical digital practices, but also to support the pedagogical development to design learning opportunities for teacher candidates to meaningfully engage with digital texts. (p. 178)
Such support is necessary if teachers are to use technology for their intended educational goals. Otherwise, teachers themselves risk being used by the tool (Swerzenski, 2021). However, having access to both technology and professional development does not simply mean training in digital technology. It also means a reflective space for teachers to implement DCP in the classroom. In describing the creation and implementation of their professional development MOOC, Rodés et al. (2021) pointed out that success “requires both access to adequate resources and content, as well as spaces for reflection and exchange” (p. 11).

Figures 1 and 2 helped us think through the fact that both undergraduate and graduate students require resources, access, training, and experience. Williamson et al. (2020) pointed out that we cannot assume that all young people have access to digital media or that all young people have digital skills and literacies, a common challenge during the pandemic. Williamson et al. (2020) argued that we must evaluate attempts to remedy access, training, and experience in complex ways. For example, students need more than just a laptop; they need reliable internet access and the skills to use software and platforms. Williamson et al. (2020) invite educators and policymakers to ask questions such as: “What is an adequate level of digital access?” “How can young people and their families be supported to [use] technology in the home?” “How can longevity of the scheme be assured [italics in original]” (p. 110). These questions speak to the fundamental notion that teaching in a digital world should be inclusive and humanity focused while promoting equity and justice.

Theme #4: Digital Critical Pedagogy Engages Questions of Publicity and Privacy in Educational Spaces

DCP often takes up issues of publicity and privacy, engaging questions about the public sphere and private communication, as indicated in the articles reviewed for this theme (Table 3). Internet studies scholars have argued that social media platforms take on a semi-public, semi-private function. For example, while many social media posts can be viewed by anyone (thus, public), they are often intended for and assumed to be viewed by the smaller audience at which they are directed (thus, private; Lange, 2007; Papacharissi, 2010). Friends posting on Instagram assume only friends in their social circle will see their posts, and they envision and plan for that smaller audience. In this way, social media is both public and private, and exists in a complex, in-between space.

The reviewed research (Table 3) grappled with questions related to digital media and social media’s complex levels of publicity, such as debating whether platforms such as Google Drive (Block, 2021), Canvas, and Twitter are public or private. The authors also wrestled with the potential benefits and risks of using digital technology in the classroom in public, semi-public, private, and semi-private ways. For example, Block (2021) invited students to share their work with their colleagues in the class by uploading the work to a shared Google Drive folder. In this way, digital technologies have made classwork that is often private into a public artifact while building community and enabling students to learn from each other (Block, 2021).

In a literature review of feminist pedagogy online, Amanova (2021) found that feminist pedagogy happens in public digital spaces, like Twitter, and that public protest, like #YesAllWomen, informed feminist pedagogy in the classroom. For Traester et al. (2021),
questions of publicity and digital literacy drove their use of digital annotation in the classroom. Concerned by the presence of “echo chambers,” or places where people only engage in ideas they already know and agree with on the internet (Sunstein, 2007), these authors shared the results of their use of Hypothesis software. Through this annotation tool, they hoped that students might gain critical thinking and reading skills to work against the simplistic practices of echo chambers.

Mertala (2020) examined public discourse around digital technologies in the classroom, discussing the case of a tablet program in Finland that was framed and pitched to the public, arguing that the discourse around this tablet program is representative of much other “EdTech speak.” Ultimately, Mertala argued that discussions of EdTech failures and other pushback are largely missing from public discourse. Such discussions, however, are essential to a robust discussion of classroom technology in the public sphere. And when these discussions of publicity and privacy are ignored or uncritically engaged, students and faculty may risk their digital safety.

**Theme #5: Digital Critical Pedagogy Critiques, Transforms, and Reshapes Course Content, Digital Technologies, and Students’ Worldviews**

Scholars in the field have provided many examples of the ways in which technology, coupled with a critical approach, offers possibilities for teaching, knowing, and being. The findings under this theme reflect an optimism about critically using technology in coursework. However, problems can arise from the inherent non-neutrality of digital tools, especially when power differentials are not considered. Our perspective remained centered on the emancipatory possibilities of DCP, as illustrated in Figure 2.

Research related to this theme (see Table 3) highlighted more effective ways to teach critical concepts in online environments, utilizing critical pedagogy alongside the tools of an LMS (Brennan et al., 2021; Montelongo & Eaton, 2020; Warr & Sampson, 2020). Synchronous video was found valuable to students when having critical conversations (Montelongo & Eaton, 2020; Warr & Sampson, 2020), though asynchronous discussions also allowed processing time for students with disabilities and English-language learners (Brennan et al., 2021). The reviewed literature highlighted the necessity of creating a social presence when using technology to teach along with the value of considering how technology complements content and pedagogical choices (Brennan et al., 2021; Montelongo & Eaton, 2020).

In addition to synchronous video in the online classroom, Baroud and Dharamshi (2020) found that intentionally creating video assignments to allow for multimodal expression in an in-person classroom environment resulted both in student resistance (e.g. students asking to simply write their assignments) as well as opportunities for better connections between students’ lived experience to the curriculum. Wright (2020) noted that the multimodal and creative spaces of digital technology provided the opportunity in religious education to support identity formation. Meri-Yilan (2020) also pointed to MOOCs as spaces for social inclusion. For example, he reported that video instructions with English subtitles were particularly helpful to students learning English in Turkey. Other instances of technological affordances offering educational possibilities included wikis, WhatsApp, and virtual reality being employed for student creative
assignments in a Ghanaian context (Adu, 2021) and through student-centered digital game-based learning (Coleman & Money, 2020).

Technologies offer the potential to critique and transform course content. For these reviewed authors (see Table 3), technology was not simply a tool for reaching learning objectives but rather transformed their disciplinary content. For example, Block (2021) wrote, “Digital humanities can fundamentally change how we define course content and goals. This digital shakeup questions the form of graduate coursework” (p. 376), and Martin (2020) argued that using DCP can transform history classes by creating new opportunities to engage oral history, queer history, and literary history. For many teacher-scholars (Amanova, 2021; Block, 2021; Martin, 2020), digital media were already transforming their disciplinary content. DCP, thus, became a way to bring and continue that transformation in the classroom.

**Theme #6: DCP Builds Literacies and Professional and Civic Skills**

In the reviewed literature, DCP not only facilitated learning in the classroom but taught literacies, professional skills, and civic habits that are essential to a digital world. Figure 2 shows activism via social media as one of the possibilities of teaching in a digital world. Some of the literacy skills included skills for reading and analyzing online information (Traester et al., 2021), familiarity with digital media venues (Block, 2021), and creative and expressive skills (Wright, 2020).

These literacies and skills were often framed as empowering for students, in line with Freire’s ideas about the possibilities of education (Keshavarz, 2020; Ruyter, 2021; Stewart & Gachago, 2016). Barber (2020) asserted, for example, that environments that engage the digital learning necessary for contemporary digital skills also have the responsibility to nurture students' ability to solve social problems in the larger community.

The ability to filter information, create communication, and critically process ideas are fundamentally democratic skills with significant implications for who has and does not have power (Traester et al., 2021; Mehta & Aguilera, 2020). Some authors invited teachers to gain a critical perspective that could enhance their professional skills. Wright (2020), Stewart and Gachago (2016), and Rodés et al. (2021) all considered how teachers might use digital media to build their own professional skills.

**Discussion**

The development of the six themes provides much-needed clarity around the term “Digital Critical Pedagogy.” While DCP has been used by those writing about teaching and digital technology, its use has been inconsistent and ill-defined. Additionally, not all work that fits within the framework of DCP has used the term. The current literature review provides a clear definition and description of DCP, which will allow researchers and practitioners to more consistently explore and operationalize the framework.

The increased clarity around DCP reveals it as a distinct framework for considering digital technologies in teaching and learning. It is different from other instructional design frameworks,
such as Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) and Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which take a more utilitarian approach to the incorporation of technology in the classroom (a comparison of DCP and other pedagogical styles can be seen in Figure 2). In contrast, the foundational assumption in the literature reviewed for this study is that technology is not a neutral tool. This idea that every technology has its own inherent logic is not one of the themes but rather a core assumption of DCP that underlies and informs all the themes. This core assumption means that DCP, more than any other instructional design framework, provides a way for educators to avoid an instrumentalist view and implementation of educational technology, helping them understand that these tools may impact instruction in unintended ways (e.g., Mertala, 2020; Fouche and Andrews, 2022). On the one hand, the authors argued that digital technologies can decolonize education. Yoon (2021), for example, concluded that media studies can “move beyond its narrow understanding of media technology as an instrument of western-centric globalization while critically addressing the limitations implicated in the affordances of digital media” (p. 187). At the same time, however, Fouche and Andrews (2022) demonstrated that technology may reproduce colonial discourses. Looking at these authors in juxtaposition to one another illustrates the complex ways in which technologies both enable and constrain critical pedagogy. One of the challenges of the pandemic was the rapid implementation of digital technologies. In some cases, LMSs, such as Canvas, Blackboard, and Moodle, were uncritically embraced. Both Dlamini and Ndzinisa (2020) and Swerenski (2021) looked toward the future, past the ad hoc technology use during the pandemic. Swerenski (2021) urged that “our pedagogical approach must likewise become more critically grounded: moving beyond adapting to new technology and becoming more attentive to the technology to which we are adapting” (p. 211).

LMSs are a good example of technology’s potential to humanize and dehumanize education. In Figure 1, the LMS tool appears as both an object of critique and a vehicle for equity (via discussion boards). LMSs can be inclusive for students with disabilities and can reduce the power differential between instructors and students (Swerenski, 2021). At the same time, LMSs can promote homogeneity in instruction and grading, and the uneven access to technology can exacerbate socioeconomic inequality (Dlamini & Ndzinisa, 2020). The design of the LMS also promotes a stance of surveillance, in which teachers may seek to measure learning by minutes students spend online, word counts in documents, and the number of discussion posts (Swerenski, 2021) rather than using more holistic assessment approaches.

Several reviewed authors specifically engaged frameworks often used in instructional technology, such as TPACK and UDL, to advocate for a critical framing that runs counter to both frameworks’ neutral view of technology. Montelongo and Eaton (2020) moved TPACK forward, stating that we must “[view] technological tools not as neutral arbiters of learning, but through the lens of various streams of relationships vital to moving pedagogical practices toward equitable and socially just ends” (p. 37). Similarly, Mehta and Aguilera (2020) were interested in moving UDL from instrumentalism toward a critical approach, arguing that “in online contexts, even with UDL, much less attention has been given to the questions of power, privilege, and ideology that drive foundational work of humanizing pedagogies” (pp. 109–110).

The fact that technology is not neutral makes it difficult to provide concrete recommendations for teachers who want to “do” DCP. Implementing technology in a critical way is not about
what tools or strategies to use. DCP is not a strategy but a standpoint that provides the educator with a lens through which to view any activity or technology (as represented in Figure 2). It is important that educators do this in the context of their particular institution and classroom because “technology . . . is a complex and social cultural artefact” (Williamson et al., 2020, p. 111).

That said, the extant literature provides some direction for educators who want to engage DCP. The themes reveal three ways that using digital technology with a critical lens can influence educational practices. First, DCP can help teachers build a classroom community. The literature in Theme 1 (DCP humanizes education by leveraging technology to disrupt hegemonic power structures of oppression present in classrooms) illustrates this. Many of the examples focused on tools that facilitated communication among students, such as Flipgrid introductions (Swerenski, 2021) or pods in Adobe Connect that allowed students to upload pictures, quotes, links, and colors “to describe in a single snapshot where the person was at that week” (Barber, 2020, p. 387). Such activities create a space where collaboration and risk-taking are more comfortable for students. Beyond merely encouraging connection, technology such as Google Docs can allow students to share their interests before class begins, giving them a voice in the syllabus and reading list for the class (Block, 2021). Teachers can leverage technology to disrupt the teacher-student hierarchy in the classroom, giving students a greater voice and more power in their own education (as shown in Figure 2).

Second, adopting DCP encourages teachers to use technology and expand the materials used, perspectives represented, and scholarship included in the course (Theme 4: DCP engages questions of publicity and privacy in educational spaces). Students broaden their understanding of what counts as academic discourse, which in turn can reshape how they view both technology and the world (Theme 5: DCP critiques, transforms, and reshapes course content, digital technologies, and students’ worldviews). For example, rather than using a published anthology, digital media allows teachers to incorporate journal articles from multiple perspectives, as well as digital magazines, blogs, book reviews, podcasts (Block, 2021), and Twitter (Amanova, 2021).

Third, DCP encourages educators to attend to context, building students’ literacies and professional and civic skills. The literature included in Theme 2 (DCP assumes that digital technology is already embedded across social systems, and therefore should be integral to classroom life) reminds us that technology is already part of the world in which both educators and learners live. Thus, digital pedagogy is not optional but essential (Baroud & Dharamshi, 2021). Theme 6 (DCP builds literacies, and professional and civic skills) then addresses ways to develop digital literacies and skills. Students can experiment with the affordances and limitations of particular tools such as Adobe Connect share pods (Barber, 2020), Google Docs (Block, 2021), or Hypothesis (Traester et al., 2021). They also should be taught information literacy in an intentional way (Keshvarz, 2021). Bringing digital pedagogy into the classroom prepares students for civic participation in an increasingly digital society.

For teachers to use technology in humanizing ways, two things are necessary. First, as the literature in Theme 3 (DCP fundamentally requires equitable access, training, resources, and experience) makes clear, access to and training for various technologies is vital for both students and teachers. Represented in Figures 1 and 2 as “training,” a deeper understanding of critical
pedagogy and specific technologies allows educators to use tools in more humanizing ways. Second, we must constantly return to the idea that technology is not neutral; what is empowering for one student or in one context may be disempowering elsewhere. Educators must continually ask themselves the question that Mehta and Aguilera (2020) propose, “For whom might the educational experiences we envision and enact be humanizing?” (p. 118).

As such, DCP is not primarily about “doing” something. Rather, it is a lens through which educators view their practices. The DCP lens became particularly important in allowing teacher-scholars to understand their experiences during the pandemic. While not all the articles covered in this literature review dealt specifically with the pandemic, in the confusion surrounding COVID-19, many of the authors in our review reached for DCP. It was a way to make sense of and evaluate the educational experiences of that time (Barber, 2020; Dlamini & Ndzinisa, 2020; Fouche & Andrews, 2022; Rodés et al., 2021; Ruyter, 2021; Williamson et al., 2020).

Post-pandemic, DCP will continue to be a necessary part of shaping education (Snir, 2021; Swerenski, 2021). Williamson et al. (2020) worried about how the pandemic served as a kind of test-case for much of EdTech, proving that content packages, software, and algorithms can “work” in the classroom, often at the expense of student agency and equity. Instead of a turn towards EdTech, the current authors argued for a turn toward research grounded in DCP: “The pandemic politics, pedagogies and practices characteristic of education in 2020 call for a reinvigorated approach to research on educational technologies and media that is driven by critical and theoretically informed analysis” (Williamson et al., p. 113). This perspective is vital for educators to keep in mind as they seek to understand their own and their students’ experiences with educational technologies.

Significance of the Study

As our FLC grappled with the literature and around DCP, we identified themes that began to emerge from these discussions. Specifically, we examined the tool itself, including power, safety, equity, and activism issues. Our question: “How is DCP being defined, operationalized, and enacted in the emerging research literature?” adds to the current literature by clearly defining DCP and providing some guideposts for operationalizing this definition in the future. As stated in the Results section, our literature review led us to define DCP as a critical and ideological stance toward teaching with technology, which assumes that technology is not neutral, creating possibilities around power, agency, and content, especially in the shadows of the pandemic. In operationalizing the definition, educators must recognize that technology use is a literacy, a form of civic engagement that requires resources, explicit training, and critique.

As Sakr and Hyder (2021) contended, much is offered through rich literature reviews, analyses, and discussions. We hope this review contributes to the discussion of possible benefits, digital inclusion hallmarks, and impactful practices and initiatives for faculty and students.

Limitations and Areas for Future Research

While this literature review was successful in furthering the conversation around and definition of DCP, it is limited by the context and current researchers’ disciplinary expertise, as well as the
timing of the project. First, this research took place within the context of the American academy. Therefore, the literature chosen was accessible to the research group within this context using their university's resources. As described in the Data Collection and Analysis section, three databases were utilized, as well as 16 specific peer-reviewed journals pertaining to the fields of study of the researchers. The research also excluded K-12 education, choosing to focus instead on the researchers’ context of higher education. The individuals in the research group were predominantly white women within the fields of education and communication. This literature review also excluded all research that had not been translated into English before March 2022 because of the language limitations of the research group. Second, the literature was gathered within a specific timeframe from February to March 2022. Due to the rapidly changing nature of technology, this study aims to provide a targeted snapshot of the literature and field of DCP from Spring 2020 through Spring 2022 rather than a comprehensive literature review.

The current study illuminates several possible areas of future research in the conversation around DCP. First, it adds another point of context (American higher education) to the growing field of DCP, helping build an international conversation. More research contexts and languages would further develop and expand this research. Second, this literature review puts forward several major themes about DCP, beginning the work of defining this educational perspective. The future work of defining and refining DCP will further clarify its methods and make its approach more accessible to faculty and students.

**Conclusion**

Through the rich work of an interdisciplinary collaborative narrative literature review, DCP has been elucidated and further defined in an American higher education context. Continuing the work of other scholars, the current researchers considered the consequential impact of this research and examined how educators defined and deployed DCP during the pandemic while racial justice activism was occurring in the United States. The current researchers determined search parameters for the literature review, independently reading selected articles and then providing their thoughts on emerging concepts. We outlined six overlapping, discursive themes underscoring the larger idea that technology is not neutral. Furthermore, these themes provide clarity around the term “Digital Critical Pedagogy.” While the term DCP has been used by those writing about teaching and digital technology, its use is often inconsistent and unclear. Therefore, our literature review led us to define DCP as a critical and ideological stance toward teaching with technology. Assuming that technology is not neutral creates possibilities around power, agency, and content, especially in the shadows of the pandemic. That said, the current study provides some direction for educators who want to engage with DCP. The themes reveal ways that using digital technology with a critical lens can influence educational practices, such as building classroom community. Teachers can leverage technology to give students a greater voice and more power in their own education. Additionally, adopting the perspective of DCP can encourage teachers to use technology to expand the kinds of materials used, the perspectives represented, and the kinds of scholarship included in the course. This can help students broaden their understanding of what counts as academic discourse. DCP encourages educators to attend to context, building students’ literacies literacies and professional skills. Including digital pedagogy in classrooms prepares students for civic participation in an increasingly digital society.
Moreover, the work of critical pedagogy is a practice of freedom from oppression. Looking at the intersections of digital and critical pedagogies offers a critical framing and a critical optimism for continuing what the pandemic pushed forward. Therefore, DCP acknowledges that technology is not neutral while recognizing the possibilities and necessity of pedagogies that challenge teaching, learning, and thinking in digital spaces.

Authors Notes

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References


*Note.* An * indicates an article that was used as part of the literature review.