Guest editorial

In the call for manuscripts for this special issue of *IJILT* on equity in digital teaching and learning, we wrote that we were looking for "critical scholarship that pushes back on platitudes and widely accepted myths about educational technology to address the complexities of reducing educational inequities." The five articles presented in this special issue contribute, as we had hoped, to exploring foundational challenges and emerging possibilities of equity for all learners, particularly as these challenges and possibilities intersect with technologies. Each piece contributes to the essential effort toward understanding and enacting equity in a range of contexts, including K-12 classrooms, open education, social media, coding, and educational technology as a field of study.

Typically, this editorial space in a special issue would give us an opportunity to identify the specific contributions of the articles in the issue, to connect them for you thematically, to share our thoughts on our fields' efforts toward equity, and to identify possible next steps. However, as we considered how to approach the editorial, we recognized that the educational research publication process is, in and of itself, a barrier to equity. With that in mind, we decided to use the guest editorial space to center voices and viewpoints that might not be heard via the traditional peer-review process, but which are vital to conversations about equity in educational technology. We reached out to a group of people engaged in equity-oriented digital work whose perspectives are not often represented in academic research journals to ask a series of questions related to equity in digital teaching and learning. Sean Michael Morris, Director of the Digital Pedagogy Lab at the University of Mary Washington and Dr Jade Davis, Director of Digital Project Management at Columbia University Libraries responded to our call. Below, we share their responses, which we have lightly edited for clarity and space.

What do you think about the potential for digital technologies to support more equitable and democratic teaching and learning?

Sean: While I don't mean to derail this question – because questions of equity have always been vital, if generally overlooked, in digital learning and teaching – I do think we need to be careful when assigning agency to technologies. Most digital technologies are designed to center the technology, for better or worse, and to minimize or erase the human driver behind the technology. In the work I do, technology is too often seen as either the problem or the solution, without a consideration for the human mind or minds behind the design of that technology, the politics of that technology, and the agency (or sublimation of the agency) of the end user. Technology is an interface, a handshake, between human beings on one end and human beings on the other.

Ugh, I'm totally that guy right now, and I'm sorry for it. To more bluntly answer your question: I have rarely, if ever, seen educational technologies – or non-educational technologies used for education – that were both designed for the public good and with equity in mind, and that are impervious to the biases and either blatant or latent cultural strategies humans bring to their interactions with one another. In some cases – as with Twitter, Facebook, and other social media, but also with platforms like Canvas, Blackboard, D2L, and tools like Hero for K12 and Turnitin – technology gives us the opportunity to witness exactly the ways that humans bring their biases to bear in new environments. Technologies like Hero and Turnitin arise out of a desire to surveil and control student behavior, for example, and are obviously not interested in issues of equity. But we also need

to look at how communities form in social media spaces, and how those communities police their borders – who is included, who is not included, and who decides? Similarly, learning management systems like Canvas, Blackboard, and D2L, while on the surface designed to create a democratic space for learning, enact or enable certain kinds of identity erasure, on some level for all students, and for some students – students of color, disabled students, trans students – more significantly.

The potential for equity in digital spaces, to put a finer point on it, cannot come from technology, but must come from the same human effort we exert toward equity in any space where we meet one another […]. Digital technologies can either foster or obfuscate our ability or willingness to listen. How attentive are we, for example, to the diversity of those we follow on Twitter? How do we position ourselves to listen for all voices – especially to hear the long-marginalized voices of our non-European and non-white colleagues?

There are important questions about how we listen, how we learn to listen, how we position ourselves to listen, especially within digital platforms. Is the discussion forum in an LMS a place where we listen? How do we listen on social media, especially when those platforms are designed for people who like to broadcast themselves (making it hard to hear quieter voices, and also unintuitive to not contribute ourselves, but rather listen)? What choices do we make with technology in order to not listen? In many cases, equity means subverting the intended purpose of a digital technology, hacking it for equity, or refusing to use it – especially in educational contexts – if it cannot be subverted or hacked.

Jade: I have a hard time with technologies being seen as a potential driver of equity because they are embedded in inequality and often create new unintended divides even within the learning space itself. I had an experience where I was working within an institution that primarily served immigrant, first generation students that connected primarily through mobile devices. Bandwidth was at a premium. The digital tools and technology they were given were subpar at best and often time consuming. They required time outside of class to master and even then it was just not good. When I would speak with people I would point out that the students were already on the margins, and these experiences created new divides because they did not meet the students where they were. The most common response I would get to this is "anything is better than nothing." When I think through this from a digital literacy perspective this is not true though. When students use digital technologies that leave footprints or students create something that is publicly visible but not professional looking it will be held against students who are already marginalized differently. Equity only comes if we give students on the margins the tools to understand their digital lives and help them make and engage in the best experience possible. If that experience is something that might be held against them, even if that is not the intent in creating it, we have to let go of that digital thing and come up with something else. Someone from a prestigious institution with access to the best of so many things that come with being at certain types of institutions can afford to have blips in their data and digital footprints that are questionable because they have other means of showing they are worthy. All of this is to say, technologies are embedded in a culture that is stratified. Rather than creating equity technologies are often designed to reaffirm this stratification. This becomes amplified when technologies are embedded in learning spaces where students do not have equal access.

As researchers and practitioners, how might we better explore, account for, and counter inequities in digital teaching and learning?

Jade: I am a strong believer in the less is more approach for countering inequities. If you take time to do a small thing well it is more impactful than doing a lot. When we attempt to do too much students who already have advantages or more knowledge in the tool will soar while those who are having to learn it as they go might not get to the same place. I am a big fan of

having students work in groups and learn from each other in digital learning as well. This way those students who can soar can help their peers get to where they are. It changes the dynamic of the learning spaces in so many ways because students become accountable to each other. I also like to shy away from the shiny new things. Part of bringing in digital teaching and learning has to be pointed towards helping students understand all the implications of the tools they are using. When we do a lot that is a lot to cover.

Sean: Best practices abound. In research, we must include diverse voices – including more representation from the voices of women, people of color, indigenous voices, disabled voices, LGBTQ voices – even to the point of asking whether we are asking the right questions. Where do the assumptions behind our research come from? How are our assumptions privileged? How is our perspective privileged? And, related, we must ask consent and permission of diverse voices to include their words and perspectives in our research. I am a white, gay, cis male, but my social location as gay doesn't give me permission to use for my own purposes the words of a woman of color, for example.

As practitioners (an interesting term, worth its own unpacking), I want to say we need to be mindful of centering ourselves too much, centering our perspectives, our biases – which often come cloaked as our expertise – and of thinking of others as the object of learning rather than the the subject.

But I think first and foremost, we must reflect on, understand, and face our own biases first. Even the idea of exploring inequity feels too objective to me. Inequity exists in just about every situation where anyone other than two white, cis, straight (arguably Christian) men are interacting. Those inequities may not be easily detected; but it's as important to understand those inequities as it is to understand that we are talking about human beings and not categories of privilege and social location. What I mean to say is that inequity is not an academic concern only, but a human one. Recognizing that hypotheses are far less valuable than dialogue is an important first step.

What voices do you think are underrepresented in the field, and what can we do about it?

Sean: Underrepresented voices are legion. I would say any voices besides those of white, cis, straight male academics are underrepresented in the field. So: women, people of color, indigenous people, disabled folks, trans folks, queer folks, and any of those who walk the borders between these groups. In academia, status is also a factor in representation, with graduate and undergraduate students, adjunct and contingent faculty, staff who have expertise but no incentive to do research, those not holding a PhD, all often occupy an unacknowledged margin.

"What can we do about it?" is a problematic question in a number of ways. Just as one cannot grant another's agency, one cannot give another voice. And "including" can be as dangerous as "excluding." When those of us in control, in power, at the center invite in voices from the margins, what do we hope to hear? Likenesses of ourselves? If we teach to reproduce ourselves, or the academy or the idea of the "academic", how have we created an equitable situation? What sort of respectability politics are we implicitly or explicitly enforcing?

In other words, we have to try to think beyond the "what can we do about it" and create instead spaces – which look more like gaps for filling than stages for sharing – that underrepresented voices can take over. Let those underrepresented create their representation.

Also: make friends. Make friends beyond your circles. Invite, but equally, or more, ask to be invited.

What kind of research do we need?

Jade: Student voices are underrepresented in the field, and we need research that is driven by students. We need to have students in this conversation. We need to have students involved in how we understand the impacts and meaning of digital work.

Sean: Our research should begin to move from quantitative and objective to qualitative and subjective, even to the point of ethnographic. But in this we must be wary of being too much the observer of others and not the participant with them. Ruth Behar, a Cuban-American anthropologist, wrote a book called *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart*. In that book, she argues for a kind of scholarly and academic writing that doesn't present as purely objective, but that rather considers the subjectivity of the author, her intersectionality, her biases, her fears, her desires, all that brought her to her subject.

Equity is only accomplished through vulnerability, and a willingness on the part of the privileged person to admit their own shortcomings, listen, and let others tell their stories. Academic research to date has not equipped its authors with vulnerability, with uncertainty, with – frankly – humility. But if we are privileged (and if we're asking these questions, we are), we can only support equity through humble action. When we ask what kind of research we need to to do to root out inequity in education, digital learning, and educational technology, we need to be prepared to reflect on what we consider "research" to be. Because even our assumptions about research are grounded in assumptions about process and evidence that are culturally specific, and specific to the privilege we have as academics.

Conclusion
As we read Jade and Sean's thoughts, we were struck by the ways they both push back on the idea that technology can be a driver, or a solution, for addressing inequity; they remind us that technologies are not neutral, but rather embedded within, and reproductive of, systems of oppression. And yet they suggest small moves and ways of making space for human and humanizing interactions that support and sustain equity. We offer this special issue as a small move that adds to the ongoing efforts to foreground equity and critically interrogate equitable digital teaching and learning.

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