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Teaching 21st Century Literacies in a Social Justice Frame

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Abstract

Educational approaches across fields of study are increasingly shaped by their encounters with emergent technologies and the literacies they instigate. The use of technology in the classroom is uneven, and often corresponds to socioeconomic indicators of the community in which the school is located. In *Education and Social Justice in a Digital Age*, Rosamund Sutherland offers a conceptual framework and concrete recommendations for contemporary teaching and learning.

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Education and Social Justice in a Digital Age by Rosamund Sutherland. Chicago, IL: Policy Press, 2014. 176 pages. ISBN: 9781447305255

1 In *Education and Social Justice in a Digital Age* (2014), Rosamund Sutherland offers a
2 conceptual framework and concrete recommendations for contemporary teaching and learning.
3 Noting a distinction between skills-based vocational models and knowledge-based academic
4 curriculum, Sutherland argues that the latter must be made available for students from all
5 backgrounds to ensure access to life opportunities, many of which require technological
6 proficiencies. The task of preparing students for college and career is increasingly shaped by
7 emergent technologies across academic disciplines and economic sectors. It is therefore
8 imperative that children and young adults learn to adeptly navigate infrastructures built for
9 communication in an era of increased digitization of content and workflows. Effectively engaging
10 the digital is often referred to as a new form of literacy for the new century. In her study,
11 Sutherland makes an important contribution to this discussion by documenting persistent
12 structural inequalities in education and providing a social justice framework for the
13 reconceptualization and application of technology in the classroom. Arguing that digital
14 technologies alone cannot change social inequalities, she nonetheless advocates their use as
15 pedagogical resources. Her book poses critical questions and offers practical recommendations
16 deeply relevant to researchers and practitioners in the field of education.

17 Sutherland begins her book, which is both theoretically informed and deeply grounded in
18 the context of the classroom, with a personal reflection on her own family's relationship to
19 education and literacy. This is a moving section, and it sets a personal tone to the text that also
20 lends it an authoritative dimension beyond her strong academic credentials. She situates herself
21 within the discourse with openness and honesty, examining how the educational system in the
22 United Kingdom has provided her with opportunities to develop and flourish in life. Her self-
23 described "optimistic disposition," which draws her toward "the art of the possible," is balanced
24 by a clear-eyed reportage of her research findings, which consistently demonstrate class divides

25 in society reflected in the schools (5). She explains that the book “has been inspired by [her]
26 desire to write about the persistent and pervasive injustices within the English educational
27 system” (1). To take just one example of “areas of deprivation” in which many working-class
28 children find themselves, compared to the “relatively privileged state comprehensive education”
29 for her own children, she notes that “less than 5% of young people from the Witherwood
30 community attended university compared with almost 50% in the more prosperous areas of the
31 city” (6). “This is not a difference between state and private education systems,” she insists, but
32 rather a difference in funding based on the location of public schools. Witherwood, with its
33 geographical compression of working-class families, is not as well-resourced as the urban
34 middle-class schools (6). As the reference to these local statistics makes clear, in its specific
35 case studies, this book will be of interest primarily to educators and researchers in the UK. But
36 its conceptual framework, incisive general critique, and concrete recommendations for practice
37 can be read transnationally; audiences in the United States, where the book is widely available,
38 will find much that is transferable to their particular teaching and learning contexts.

39 The scope of Sutherland’s inquiry is quite broad. She offers a brief historical overview of
40 technology in education, a discussion of its possibilities and limitations, and a general critique of
41 dominant approaches in the field. One element that is missing from her study is an engagement
42 with specific forms of digital literacy. Her belief that “paper-based forms of literacy are still
43 important aspects of education” goes some length in explaining this absence; however, from the
44 standpoint of the audience, in-depth coverage of digital literacy would also be extremely useful
45 (111). For while her commitment to paper-based forms of literacy is meritorious, readers
46 seeking detailed analyses of instructional technologies will need to look elsewhere. Sutherland
47 focuses instead on a broader frame of metacognition, or the reflection upon one’s own thinking,
48 and transfer, or the application of previously acquired knowledge to new situations. She uses
49 the metaphor of a “toolkit,” from which students can select and apply their abilities across tasks
50 (117). The book is at times quite general, and could be said to be lacking in specificity. This is

51 its one shortcoming. Sutherland overcomes this deficit quite substantively and productively in
52 her theoretical framing of the general issues she raises. The conclusions she draws from this
53 framework have significant implications for the way we approach students, classrooms, and
54 technology.

55 The author argues that “the purpose of education is to develop the capabilities that
56 enable young people to both flourish as human beings and participate in society” (11). She
57 derives the term “capabilities,” an important vocabulary for her social justice perspective, from
58 the work of economist Amartya Sen. She uses his definition and elaboration of the term to make
59 an important distinction between educational approaches. The “dominant” approaches, in her
60 view, understand students in terms of “human capital,” to be measured through the rubric of
61 “economic growth.” For a counterpoint, she looks to Sen, her most important interlocutor. His
62 conceptual framework of “human flourishing” understands capabilities as “a person’s ability to
63 do valuable acts or reach valuable states of being;” the perspective seeks to articulate “the
64 alternative combinations of things a person is able to do or be” (32). Sutherland argues that
65 emergent technologies are resources upon which individual students can draw in order to
66 further and deepen their capabilities. I would strongly recommend her application of Sen’s
67 theoretical frame to those who, like Sutherland, are working toward an ideal of education as a
68 foundational element of well-being, development, and justice.

69 This framework lends complexity to the disarmingly straightforward central argument of
70 the book. She writes,

71 A curriculum for a just society has to recognize the competing ideologies in the 21st
72 century curriculum, which centre around a tension between knowledge and skills. I
73 suggest that there is a divide with respect to the curriculum being offered in schools, and
74 that this divide tends to be patterned along social class lines. Schools that serve
75 predominantly working-class communities are more likely to have adopted a skills-based
76 curriculum, with an emphasis on vocational courses, whereas schools that serve more

77 middle-class communities are more likely to offer a knowledge-based curriculum, with an
78 emphasis on academic courses. (10)

79 Sutherland's strongest observational point is her attention to this tension between traditions of
80 disseminating knowledge and developing employable skills. Her claim, following this
81 observation, is that the tendency to focus solely on skills development within a vocational
82 trajectory limits the capabilities and opportunities of low-income students. Therefore, educators
83 working in communities marginalized by economic hardship must insist upon a robust
84 knowledge based curriculum, perhaps alongside skills development. Sutherland suggests that
85 technology in the classroom can support both imperatives, but only if engaged thoughtfully;
86 otherwise "there is likely to be very little impact of digital technologies on teaching and learning"
87 (28).

88 As Sutherland's arguments above make clear, her findings and frameworks are
89 actionable. Advocacy of knowledge based curriculum is her primary recommendation. Secondly,
90 she writes that there is an urgent need to take "collective responsibility when tackling the
91 manifestly severe injustices that exist with respect to education" (131). To make education
92 reform a truly collective endeavor, she encourages the emphasis of collaboration over
93 competition, proposing a multifaceted strategy for implementing cooperative work. First, she
94 argues that students must learn collaboration as a foundational skill; second, she endorses
95 "academic researchers working cooperatively with teachers," which, she notes, "is very different
96 from the current system in which educational academics are usually separated in their practice
97 of research from teacher practitioners" (136). Lastly, in order for cooperation to flourish, at the
98 level of the student, the teacher, and the researcher, schools must become more flexible
99 institutions (132). Having undertaken an extensive collaborative project with teachers, which she
100 details in her eighth chapter, one that resulted in the development of a new model of
101 professional development for educators, Sutherland is in an authoritative position to advocate
102 cooperative practices (135).

103 *Education and Social Justice in a Digital Age* will be most useful to those whose work is
104 situated at the intersection of education and social justice issues related to class difference. For
105 education researchers who observe and collaborate with low-income school districts,
106 Sutherland's work will be an important theoretical touchstone. Instructors in such districts will
107 find that the book substantiates the work they are doing to support students beyond vocational
108 training. Furthermore, if her work finds an audience in those who write education policy, her
109 findings have the potential to inform the funding structures that underwrite programs aimed at
110 broadening access for low-income students. She does direct one of her arguments, in particular,
111 toward policy makers; she writes against high-stakes performance measures, which emphasize
112 skills over knowledge, and argues instead for "radical changes to the assessment system so
113 that teachers can focus on teaching for engagement with knowledge, as opposed to 'teaching to
114 the test'" (11). For each of these distinct audiences, Rosamund Sutherland makes an important
115 contribution to the reshaping of contemporary educational practices by re-framing the critical
116 discussion of 21st century literacies as a social justice issue.