(Digital) Media as Critical Pedagogy

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Abstract

From chalkboard sites to social media, from smartphones to interactive grading software, there is an overabundance of digital learning tools at our fingertips, many of which float into our classrooms on airy praise from university administrators, politicians, and corporate technicians alike who tout the incorporation of these technologies into our teaching as an undeniably positive step toward the “enhancement” of student learning. Rather than promoting a critical model of learning by which students and teachers can explore the matrix of possibilities “afforded” by their relationship to new media, the techno-fetishist instrumentality of “technology-enhanced learning” functions as an efficient means of materializing neoliberal market ideology and adjusting us to accepting our positions as self-contained users of discrete tools that define for us what the goals and processes of learning will be. It is imperative, then, that we engage ourselves and our students in the critical pedagogical process of learning to learn in conversation with – not at the behest of – media. To do so gets to the very heart of critical pedagogy itself, because, as I argue, the ontological assumptions underwriting the very hope and possibility of critical pedagogy as a political project are nothing if not the essential coordinates for a media theory of being. If we are to determine how to develop a sufficiently critical pedagogy in the age of digital media, we must first re-locate the learning process in the exploration of the open, dialectical circuits between human and world through which life itself is mediated, and from which political change is made possible.

Keywords

Media Theory, Critical Pedagogy, Digital, Ontology

“Within history, in concrete, objective contexts, both humanization and dehumanization are possibilities for a person as an uncompleted being conscious of their incompleteness.”

– Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed
“Since in reality there is nothing to which growth is relative save more growth, there is nothing to which education is subordinate save more education.”

– John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*

Over the past three decades, opining about the educational applications of digital technologies has become a cottage industry unto itself. “Indeed,” Neil Selwyn writes, “most recently a fresh set of educational discourses has accompanied the emergence of ‘new’ technologies such as social media, wireless connectivity and cloud data storage, and not least the seemingly unassailable rise of personalized and portable computing devices such as smartphones and tablets” (2013: 3). From chalkboard sites to social media, from smartphones to Prezi, from in-class polling apps to interactive grading software, there is an almost suffocating overabundance of digital tools at our fingertips, many of which float into our classrooms on airy praise from university administrators, politicians, and corporate technicians alike who tout the incorporation of these technologies into our teaching as an undeniably positive step toward the “enhancement” of student learning (Ahalt & Fecho, 2015). As a result, “Public debate, commercial marketing, education policy texts and academic research are now replete with sets of phrases and slogans such as ‘twenty-first century skills’, ‘flipped classrooms’, ‘self-organised learning environments’, ‘unschooling’, an ‘iPad for every child’, ‘massively online open courses’ [MOOCs] and so on” (Selwyn, 2013: 3). As our educational discourse continues to be pumped full of such slogans, the conclusion that the future of learning is – and must be – digital seems to have already been made for us.

That we and our students are living in a digitalized world is a blunt fact. And it seems futile, and perhaps even slightly irresponsible, not to actively engage students in the process of learning about (and learning on) the digital terrains that they have grown up navigating – and will continue to navigate once they leave our classrooms. And there is, indeed, much to be gained from doing so, for students and teachers alike. As Ernest Morrell, Rudy Dueñas, Veronica Garcia, and Jorge López note, “Today’s youth spend the majority of their waking lives as consumers and producers of media […] [They] blog, pin, post, comment, and share links with social networks on a scale that, a generation ago, would have been possible only for professional media personnel” (2013: 2). In their daily consumption and production of media, along with their flexible negotiation of ever-evolving media-worlds, students today are developing skills outside
of the classroom that have tremendous capacities to inform what and how they learn inside the classroom. Moreover, on the flip side, what forms the learning process takes in the digitally connected classroom, and how students’ own subjectivities are shaped and mediated through it, can have significant bearing on the kinds of “digital citizens” (Talib, 2018: 56) students will become.

This is precisely why, even for those of us who try not to be total Luddites, there is something deeply unnerving in the spoken and unspoken presumptions that are being made about students and learning and technology throughout much of the professional, corporate, and governmental discourses of digital education. Such presumptions are routinely reinforced by the instrumentalist manner in which we deploy digital technologies in the classroom; that is, by the way we assume and accept our positions as users of tools whose uses themselves have been prescribed – and whose functionality has been programmed and hidden behind a black box (Goffey & Fuller, 2012) – by opaque commercial, governmental, and administrative forces beyond the classroom, all of which have their own incentives and agendas calibrated to the positions they occupy in our political economy. It is crucial to remember that there is nothing predestined about the sort of digital technologies we incorporate into our teaching, the specific shapes they take, the functions they perform, the skills they test, their methods for measuring success, the data they collect, the people they put out of work, etc. But there is nothing neutral about these things either. As Kristin Smith and Donna Jeffery write, “The widespread acceptance of online [and other digital] educational technologies is not simply the product of pure technological evolution. They are deeply embedded in the social, economic, and political contexts governed by neoliberal discourses and practices” (2013: 378). The top-down rush to “enhance” the learning process and “streamline” teaching duties through the adoption of new digital technologies has been part of an institutional realignment that is both “deeply embedded” in the historical contexts of neoliberalism and consonant with the aims of the generalized, but unevenly executed, neoliberalization of education as such (Newfield, 2008; Bousquet, 2008; Schrecker, 2010; Giroux, 2015; Hall, 2016).

Neoliberalism, as Wendy Brown writes:

is most commonly understood as enacting an ensemble of economic policies in accord with its root principle of affirming free markets. These
include deregulation of industries and capital flows; radical reduction in welfare state provisions and protections for the vulnerable; privatized and outsourced public goods, ranging from education, parks, postal services, roads, and social welfare to prisons and militaries; [...] the conversion of every human need or desire into a profitable enterprise, from college admissions preparation to human organ transplants, from baby adoptions to pollution rights, from avoiding lines to securing legroom on an airplane; and, most recently, the financialization of everything and the increasing dominance of finance capital over productive capital in the dynamics of the economy of everyday life (2015: 28).

Under the rank shadow of neoliberalism, more and more public goods and personal desires are broken down and rewired to accommodate the total and seamless penetration of market values into every facet of “the economy of everyday life.” As critical sites for the accumulation of capital and the reproduction of neoliberal ideology, educational institutions are unmoored from the public good and restructured to ease the infiltration of money, personnel, and directives from the private sector (Weiner, 2004; Newfield, 2016; Cervone, 2018). This structural overhaul is accompanied by formal (and often strictly enforced) changes to curricula, teaching practices, learning outcomes, methods of assessment, etc. – changes designed to complement these retrofitted neoliberal prerogatives while (re)producing in students and teachers alike the sort of self-policing “responsible subjects” (Clarke, 2004: 33) neoliberalism requires. “As a result, educators are increasingly expected to enact cost containment measures, cooperate with the demands of efficiency-driven management styles, and work under expectations of labor flexibility and adaptability” (Smith & Jeffery, 2013: 375), all while being charged with the task of enacting and enforcing “an idea of education as content delivery and absorption, with students designated as recipients and clients rather than partners in an exploratory enterprise” (Mullen, 2002: 19).

These are the hard, practical contexts in which the push for integrating more digital technologies into the learning process is taking place. And it is precisely in this vein that we must critically appraise the ideological functions and subjective outcomes of said technological integration as well as the equally utopian and fatalistic narrative “that
technology is inevitable, that technology is wrapped up in our notions of progress, and that somehow progress is inevitable itself and is positive” (Young & Watters, 2016). Because, at the same time that educational institutions have transformed into “administrative [apparatuses] whose morality is outsourced to the market” (Alvarez, 2017), the instrumentalist, techno-fetishist embrace of learning with and through digital tools is part and parcel of the essential reproduction of neoliberal market ideology. “Many elements of online education exemplify the core beliefs of the private, commercial sector in that they necessarily concern themselves with trying to measure and count narrow outcomes rather than with the complexities of learning […] challenging subject matter […]. If education is to be efficient, then it simply must be capable of being measured” (Jeffery & Smith, 2013: 377). That corporate, administrative, and governmental efforts to accelerate the incorporation of digital technologies into the learning process have surged in tandem with the thorough neoliberalization of education institutions is not a coincidence. These technologies are less designed and deployed to expand the horizons of critical student learning than to narrowly redefine the very shape and scope of formal learning in accordance with the prerogatives of the neoliberal power structure, which prizes, above all else, that which (and those who) can be standardized, quantified, managed, and monetized. Thus, as Jesse Stommel and Sean Michael Morris write in their open-access e-book, An Urgency of Teachers, “educators and students alike have found themselves more and more flummoxed by a system that values assessment over engagement, learning management over discovery, content over community, outcomes over epiphanies” (2018). And to uncritically approach the integration and use of digital technologies into the learning process is to make ourselves and our students vulnerable to being used by them – to being adjusted, programmed, and made comfortable with the very worldly conditions that we, as critical educators, are ostensibly trying to challenge. We must, therefore, be wary of the professional discourses that herald this process of technological integration as both inevitable and objectively positive.

In her contribution to the edited volume Critical Learning in Digital Networks, for instance, Sarah Hayes examines trends in these educational discourses from the U.S., E.U., and Australia, and picks up on a relatively recent and rather telling terminological shift. Hayes notes that the ubiquity of terms like “e-Learning” and “online learning,” which, in more-or-less neutral ways, primarily served to describe the digital context in
which learning (however it was defined) took place, has been largely usurped by the
more explicitly value-judgment-laden discourse of “technology-enhanced learning.” In
this positivist discourse, it is not only taken as a given that to infuse education with
newer technological elements is, by definition, to enhance the learning process; it is
also presumed that the learning process itself is straightforward enough that its
technology-induced “enhancement” can be so confidently assured. As Hayes writes,
“The verb ‘enhanced’ is selected and placed in between ‘technology’ and ‘learning’ to
imply (through a value judgment) that technology has now enhanced learning, and will
continue to do so” (2015: 15). Ideologically, epistemologically, politically, the implicit
value judgment that is buried in (and enforced by) the discourse of “technology-
enhanced learning” is doing a lot of heavy lifting here. How the learning process will
be defined, what will be learned, and to what ends – these and other vital questions
are subsumed under the narrow purview of a formal education apparatus that, as
mentioned above, is designed to clear the way for market forces to penetrate every
level of daily life while also shaping and pumping out the kind of responsible subjects
neoliberalism needs to reproduce and maintain its hegemony.

What must be noted here – especially given the theme of this issue of Media Theory –
is that the positivist assertion embedded in the professional discourse of “technology-
enhanced learning” explicitly (and even violently) forecloses the epistemological,
subjective, and political possibilities that are otherwise expressed in the discourse of
technological “affordance.” “Technology-enhanced learning” bears out a self-
affirming promise that the technology in question will not “afford” teachers and
students the means to explore new learning possibilities so much as it will efficiently
compel them to perform what the programmers of said technology have determined
learning to be (and that said technology, with exacting precision, will evaluate teaching
and learning on the strict basis of this performance). In fact, we could say that the
political epistemology represented by the assertion of “technology-enhanced learning”
is roundly antagonistic to the understanding of technology that is belied by the very
notion of affordance. Because where there is affordance there is openness, uncertainty,
a chance for thinking or doing something that is made possible – but is by no means
guaranteed – by that which affords. Such openness is antithetical to the neoliberal
prerogatives and parameters of “technology-enhanced learning.”
Of course, as an analytical concept that can help us better understand the range and scope of technological functionality, “affordance” is equally a question of the possibilities that are opened up and foreclosed by the structural specificities of a particular tool, program, environment, etc. “Affordances are functional in the sense that they are enabling, as well as constraining, factors in a given organism’s attempt to engage in some activity,” Ian Hutchby notes (2001: 448). “Certain objects, environments or artefacts have affordances which enable the particular activity while others do not. But at the same time the affordances can shape the conditions of possibility associated with an action: it may be possible to do it one way, but not another” (2001: 448). Thus, while it is certainly true that the functional specificity of certain digital technologies can afford students and teachers the “conditions of possibility” for developing new forms of critical, collaborative, and exploratory learning, it is equally true that engaging with these or any technologies will inevitably limit the horizons of what is doable and thinkable to what their functional specificity allows (i.e. affords). For the purposes of this discussion, however, what is especially noteworthy is the fact that affordance names a context in which the horizon of possibilities is limited (and opened) by the relation between a human organism and the functional specificity of a distinct technology. The relation itself forms the generative matrix of possibility: “Affordances are thereby focused on the relationship between people and object, their creative and adaptive interaction with the environment rather than any compliant response to any designed features of that environment” (Conole & Dyke, 2004: 302, emphases added). Indeed, this is why the neoliberal instrumentality denoted by “technology-enhanced learning” steers clear of any serious reference to affordance. The former, which does seek to elicit (if not compel) a “compliant response to […] designed features,” is not content with the relational limiting of possibilities named in the discourse of technological affordance; it is deliberately designed and deployed, rather, to foreclose (as much as possible) the contingency of possibility itself.

Rather than opening a learning space in which teachers, students and digital technologies can explore one another in a matrix of relational possibility, “technology-enhanced learning” inflates the neoliberal illusion of possibility with increasingly personalized, choice-adaptive programs and multi-modal functionalities that nevertheless reduce the user’s say in what and how they learn to nil. “The embedding of the idea of ‘enhancing learning through the use of technology,’” Hayes continues,
“firmly structures educational technology within a framework of exchange value. It places emphasis on what technology is doing to yield a profit rather than how learning takes place as a human process” (2015: 16). There is no real acknowledgment of, let alone appreciation for, relational agency in the idea of “technology-enhanced learning” – at least not on the part of the learner. More than anything or anyone else, it is the technology itself that is granted a kind of coercive agency to convey learning subjects to their final destination; it alone maintains a sense of agential singularity that everyone else is denied. And, in so doing, it functions quite effectively as a medium for the reproduction of neoliberal subjecthood and authoritative social control shrouded in the illusion of personal choice. “If we discuss technology as detached from the humans who perform tasks with it, then it simply becomes an external force acting on our behalf. This objective approach disempowers the human subject to undertake any critique, as it effectively removes them from the equation, closing down possibilities for more varied conversations across diverse networks” (Hayes, 2015: 17).

As one illustrative example, we could look to the page on the U.S. Department of Education’s website that is dedicated to “Use of Technology in Teaching and Learning.” The opening passage on the website reads:

Technology ushers in fundamental structural changes that can be integral to achieving significant improvements in productivity. Used to support both teaching and learning, technology infuses classrooms with digital learning tools, such as computers and hand held devices; expands course offerings, experiences, and learning materials; supports learning 24 hours a day, 7 days a week; builds 21st century skills; increases student engagement and motivation; and accelerates learning. Technology also has the power to transform teaching by ushering in a new model of connected teaching. This model links teachers to their students and to professional content, resources, and systems to help them improve their own instruction and personalize learning. Online learning opportunities and the use of open educational resources and other technologies can increase educational productivity by accelerating the rate of learning; reducing costs associated with instructional materials or program delivery; and better utilizing teacher time (U.S. Department of Education).
Notice that, unlike the examples analyzed by Hayes, this passage omits any specific mention of “technology-enhanced learning”; in fact, this particular page on the Department of Education website does not mention the words “enhance” or “enhancement” even once. Far from representing a deviation from the positivist fatalism embodied in the discourse of “technology-enhanced learning,” however, we could argue that this passage represents its apotheosis. More than anything else, this description of educational technology reads like a company promo, a matter-of-fact discursive fusion of government and industry confidence that said technology will make good on these promises to “increase educational productivity by accelerating the rate of learning” while also forcing educators to adopt more of the qualities prized by the neoliberal model of (cheap) labor: hyper-productivity, 24-7 accessibility, flexibility, etc. Once again, that these are the given (and celebrated) parameters for “successful” teaching, and that learning as such is explicitly measured in terms of speed, quantity, and productivity, is not an accident. “The commodity form and its administrative simulacra are now able to penetrate hitherto protected zones,” philosopher Andrew Feenberg notes, in conversation with Petar Jandrić (2015: 143). “This is the essence of neo-liberalism, the extension of commercial relations and criteria into every area of life […] Deskilling education and bringing it under central management is now on the agenda. Money would be saved and the ‘product’ standardized. Technology is hyped as the key to this neo-liberal transformation of education. Computer companies, governments, university administrations have formed an alliance around this utopian, or rather dystopian, promise” (2015: 143).

“The more our tools are naturalized, invisible, or inscrutable,” as Morris and Stommel write, the less likely we are to interrogate them” (2018). Likewise, the more intimately our professional responsibilities, and students’ scholastic success, are bound to carrying out these instrumentalist directives, the more relentlessly the forces of neoliberal administration convert our learning environments into “dystopian” assemblages of “technology-enhanced learning,” the harder it becomes to imagine a narrative of “new media encounter” whose arc has not already been determined for us. Because, as Alan Liu writes, “Good accounts of new media encounter imagine affordances and configurations of potentiality. We don’t want a good story of new media with a punch line giving somebody the last word. We want a good world of new media that gives everyone at least one first word […] We want a way of imagining our encounter with
new media that surprises us out of the ‘us’ we thought we knew” (2013: 16, emphases added). Under the market-calibrated aegis of “technology-enhanced learning,” accounts of new media encountered in and outside the classroom have, for the most part, already been written for us – accounts that take it as a given that learning with and through digital technologies will be a process defined and measured by those technologies themselves. When it comes to imagining the “configurations of possibility” that may exist for us and our students in our potential encounter with new media, we are, once again, presented with the illusion of agency in a plot that has been scripted by the very authors of our own continued exploitation and domination. It is, thus, all the more incumbent upon us, as critical educators, to imagine – and engage our students in the vital process of imagining for themselves – a narrative of new media encounter in which “The future of learning will not be determined by tools but by the re-organization of power relationships and institutional protocols” (Scholz, 2011: IX).

Such an imperative necessarily involves engaging ourselves and our students in the critical pedagogical process of learning to learn in conversation with – not at the behest of – media. To do so gets to the very heart of critical pedagogy itself, because the project of critical pedagogy is ultimately a media project. And if we are to determine how to develop a sufficiently critical pedagogy in the age of digital media, critical pedagogy and/as media theory first enjoins us to re-examine (and intervene in) the sites where learning as such actually takes place. Because, I argue, the core political and ontological premises upon which critical pedagogy is based – and from which it maintains a sense of hope that we and our worlds can change – breathe life into an understanding of the learning process as a process of becoming in which we must explore, analyze, and pratically engage the open, dialectical circuits between human and world that mediate life itself.

Perhaps at no other point, then, has the need for a critical media pedagogy been so urgent at the same time that the institutional and technological conditions of formal learning have become so structurally hostile to the spirit of critical pedagogy itself. The more seamlessly digital technologies are integrated into the learning process, the more crucial it is for students and teachers alike to develop their capacities for critically analyzing – and intervening in – the broader, overlapping forces of social control that are mediated through them. It is imperative that we critically (re)examine our own
pedagogies, and that we ask what it will mean to work with our students to hash out a vulnerable, critical, and creative learning praxis that not only resists the coercive interpellation of neoliberal subjectivation, but that also affirms and expands their humanity in the digitalized world while bolstering their capacities to interrogate, attack, and dismantle the conditions that dehumanize them by stifling their learning.

Critical pedagogy doesn’t necessarily start with Paulo Freire, but it certainly doesn’t exist without him. “To separate Paulo from critical pedagogy is not possible,” Shirley Steinberg writes (2015: ix). “We know our own positionality within critical pedagogy by how we first came to know Paulo Freire” (2015: ix). A world-renowned educator and philosopher, Freire developed revolutionary and widely successful methods for teaching poor, illiterate populations in Brazil before the 1964 military coup (Golpe de 64), after which he was imprisoned for 70 days and forced to live in exile for 15 years. It was during the first decade of his exile that Freire wrote and published his first book, *Education, the Practice of Freedom* (1967). This was followed by his most famous book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), which has served as the lodestar of critical pedagogues ever since. Half-a-century’s worth of independent studies, internal debates, critical reappraisals, practical experimentations, and theoretical variations have unfolded in the wake of the publication of Freire’s seminal work, but everything in the ever-exploding-and-rearranging field of critical pedagogy still orbits around the core, radical concept that is articulated in it. (By no means do I wish to suggest that practitioners have followed a singular, prescribed path in developing their own critical pedagogies, nor do I mean to imply that the “field” of critical pedagogy as such is not riven with necessary critiques and departures on practical and theoretical issues regarding, for instance, race, disability, the mind/body distinction, etc. [Brock & Orelus, 2015; Ellsworth, 1989; Erevelles, 2000; S. Shapiro, 1999]. However, I argue that the coherence of critical pedagogy as an expressly political project rests on a set of ontological assumptions about the mediated relationship between human and world – assumptions that fundamentally challenge the reductive, dehumanizing treatment of student and teacher subjecthood that is materially reinforced by the neoliberal apparatus of “technology-enhanced learning.”) At base, the project of critical pedagogy, as Henry Giroux puts it, remains fixated on “[drawing] attention to the ways
in which knowledge, power, desire, and experience are produced under specific basic conditions of learning and [illuminating] the role that pedagogy plays as part of a struggle over assigned meanings, modes of expression, and directions of desire, particularly as these bear on the formation of the multiple and ever-contradictory versions of the ‘self’ and its relationship to the larger society” (2011: 4).

It was through Freire’s distinct voice that the project of critical pedagogy as we understand it today found its first real articulation. That being said, Freire’s was an articulation of something that has always been latent in the “struggle to be more fully human” (Freire, 2005: 47), a calling-forth of something that is always calling out, always reaching from somewhere just below the surface of what is, like fingers stretching the outer membrane of the possible in the endless, groping “struggle for a fuller humanity” (Freire, 2005: 47). It was an articulation that contained within it traces and echoes of those who came before Freire, and those who came after, those who sense, have sensed, or will sense – without Freire to hard boil their sensation into something tangible and familiar – that the reality roiling under the austere lid of what we call education is much more complex and consequential than we are compelled to think, that the process of teaching is neither straightforward nor unilateral, that the subjects and objects of learning are never set, self-contained things, and that the contexts for learning are never neutral.

Whether known to Freire or not, his work condensed and soldered together various insights that had manifested in bits and pieces across the scattered works of earlier critical thinkers and traditions – from Karl Marx and G.W.F. Hegel to John Dewey and Anísio Teixeira, from W.E.B. DuBois and Lev Vygotsky to the Frankfurt School and Franz Fanon. What emerged in Freire’s work, and has since taken shape in the radical project of critical pedagogy, has always been rooted in that nagging, discomfiting sense that the societal and individual stakes of education are incredibly high and that the means and ends of learning will vary significantly depending on how “education” is defined. Moreover, as discussed in relation to the neoliberal apparatus of “technology-enhanced learning,” the types of subjects we are trained to become, and the ways we are compelled to fit and function inside the hegemonic power structure, are likewise made contingent upon decisions about who (and what) gets to define education as such and determine where it will take place, what its goals will be,
how those goals will be set and measured, etc. Critical pedagogy “picks up on the idea that educational processes, practices, and modes of engagement play an active role in the production and reproduction of social relations and systems. [It] seeks to understand and is concerned with the ways that schools and the educational process sustain and reproduce systems and relations of oppression” (Porfilio & Ford, 2015: xvi).

Whether in public schools, private schools, charter schools, officially approved independent programs, etc., we spend the better part of (at least) our first two decades of life being formally “educated” in the customs of social life along with all the other “necessary” practices and forms of knowledge that will presumably equip us, as independent agents, to successfully navigate the world “out there” that we are preparing to enter. But the critical pedagogical project understands that educational institutions themselves are not worlds apart. At every step of the way, our formalized processes of education are thoroughly integrated into and reflective of the broader, given power arrangement in our society; they are a critical node in “the machinery by which […] power relations give rise to a possible corpus of knowledge [and by which said] knowledge extends and reinforces the effects of this power” (Foucault, 1995: 29).

Thus, these processes of formal education serve as a vital technology of subjectivation, training students and teachers to become the kind of responsible subjects who are well-adjusted to — and who will go forth to reproduce — the conditions of their own domination. “A central tenet of [critical] pedagogy maintains that the classroom, curricular, and school structures teachers enter are not neutral sites waiting to be shaped by educational professionals,” Joe Kincheloe writes (2004: 2). Thus, “proponents of critical pedagogy understand that every dimension of schooling and every form of educational practice are politically contested spaces” (2004: 2). That “every dimension of schooling and every form of educational practice” are political is a given; that they are “politically contested spaces,” however, is not. The dimensions of formal learning are political inasmuch as they are imbricated in an educational apparatus that is built to, at worst, functionally replicate the historico-specific conditions that bolster the dominant power arrangement or, at best, leave those conditions uncontested. The naturalness of the conditions that maintain and enforce the given power arrangement in the world “out there” is inscribed in the minds and bodies (mind-bodies) of students and teachers. Thus, by the time students are ready to
take what they’ve learned in school and “make their way” in the world, the world has already made its way through them.

Schools and official education systems are by no means the only sites where the political forces of social reproduction come to a head, but they do serve as critical conductors of possibility for what is, at base, Freire’s primary concern: the oscillating movements, electrical currents, and stubborn blood clots of the macro- and micro-dialectics playing out in the mutual shaping of individual and world. “World and human beings do not exist apart from each other,” Freire writes, “they exist in constant interaction” (2005: 50). The struggle for “humanization” unfolds in the dynamic and slowed-down spaces of life where this “constant interaction” mediates the flow, distribution, capture, and dispersion of energies that shape and re-shape the world … which shapes and re-shapes the human … who shapes and re-shapes the world … which shapes and re-shapes the human … who shapes and re-shapes … ad infinitum.

As a point of departure from any sort of vulgar economic or material determinism, it follows that the project of critical pedagogy is imbued with a sense of undying hope that things can change, and that pedagogy can play a vital role in that change. “Hope is a natural, possible, and necessary impetus in the context of our unfinishedness. Hope is an indispensable seasoning in our human, historical experience. Without it, instead of history we would have pure determinism” (Freire, 1998: 69). This hope derives from the essential belief in the multidirectionality of energy flows in the dialectical struggles of everyday life, in the mutually constitutive, back-and-forth circuit between the world that inscribes itself upon us and our subjective resistance to inscription (Garoian & Gaudelius, 2001: 334). It is a belief in the fundamental capacity for “always-unfinished” individuals to break far enough away from the grip of the material, cognitive, embodied contexts of their domination that they can learn and develop a critical consciousness (conscientização) of the fact that this isn’t the only way things can or should be. On top of this, it is a belief that said individuals can and must turn around and direct their liveliness at attacking the structural supports behind these contexts. At the very core of critical pedagogy is an essential presumption of breakable worlds and unfinished people in motion:

Reality which becomes oppressive results in the contradistinction of men as oppressors and oppressed. The latter, whose task it is to struggle for
their liberation together with those who show true solidarity, must acquire a critical awareness of oppression through the praxis of this struggle. One of the gravest obstacles to the achievement of liberation is that oppressive reality absorbs those within it and thereby acts to submerge human beings’ consciousness. Functionally, oppression is domesticating. To no longer be prey to its force, one must emerge from it and turn upon it. This can be done only by means of the praxis: reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it (Freire, 2005: 51).

What Freire brings to the surface here is a conceptualization of education as a contestable site of vulnerable and volatile encounter. Such encounters are strategically contained and policed within the contexts of schooling systems (but also in realms like popular culture, government, etc.) which, in turn, serve to reproduce the conditions of pacification (or “domestication”) of the oppressed many and the corresponding conditions of societal domination by the oppressive few. Freire’s conceptualization of education also positions it as an encounter that trembles, always, with the potential for something more, something radical, something else.

The critical pedagogue understands that education, more or less, names the formalized, teleologized containment of the humanizing processes of learning, the generative power of which is recognized by the oppressive few as an inherent threat to the preservation and maintenance of their domination. It is, thus, among the most vital charges of the project of critical pedagogy to locate and interrogate the ways that, materially, symbolically, and practically, a society’s existing educational apparatus functions to sustain an “oppressive reality” that works the oppressed over, submerging human beings’ consciousness of their oppression and of the contingent, pliable, and breakable nature of the worldly conditions that oppress and dehumanize them. Such a charge, moreover, carries with it a critically conscious recognition that who one is is also contingent, pliable, and dependent upon a world in motion that is as well. “It approaches individual growth as active, cooperative, and social process, because the self and society create each other” (Shor, 1992: 15). And one must take that recognition and follow through with praxis to break the world that subjugates them: “To no longer be prey to its force, one must emerge from it and turn upon it” (Freire, 2005: 51).
It is of insurmountable importance for Freire and for critical pedagogy writ large – as it is for media theorists – that concern for the mutual making, un-making, and re-making of human and world in the dialectical meatgrinder of history, holds fast an ontological understanding of the human as a fundamentally open-ended thing whose being is always, necessarily, a being-in-process, mediated by changing worlds in and through which it can become what it will be. “Education as the practice of freedom – as opposed to education as the practice of domination – denies that man is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world; it also denies that the world exists as a reality apart from people” (Freire, 2005: 81). The human, that is, figures as a kind of circuit between “inside” and “outside,” between the biological organism and the world, without which it could not be(come) itself. Whether tacitly or explicitly, critical pedagogy, “as the practice of freedom,” presupposes a process of being wherein life is mediated by “external” worlds that make the human what it is, and critical pedagogy itself names a consciously praxical intervention in this process, a harnessing of the fact that the human, consciously or not, must and always does have a hand in making, reproducing, and altering the worlds in which it can be(come) itself.

Perhaps nowhere else is this point made more clearly than in the oft-stated contempt Freire and other critical pedagogues have for the “banking” concept of learning in which students are understood as “‘containers’ to be ‘filled’ by the teacher” with demonstrably replicable forms of knowledge whose retention by student-receptacles can be easily tested. In a lengthy passage from Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Freire writes:

Implicit in the banking concept is the assumption of a dichotomy between human beings and the world: a person is merely in the world, not with the world or with others; the individual is spectator, not re-creator. In this view, the person is not a conscious being (corpo consciente); he or she is rather the possessor of a consciousness: an empty “mind” passively open to the reception of deposits of reality from the world outside. For example, my desk, my books, my coffee cup, all the objects before me – as bits of the world which surround me – would be “inside” me, exactly as I am inside my study right now. This view makes no distinction between being accessible to consciousness and entering consciousness. The distinction, however, is essential: the objects which surround me are simply accessible
to my consciousness, not located within it. I am aware of them, but they are not inside me. It follows logically from the banking notion of consciousness that the educator’s role is to regulate the way the world “enters into” the students. The teacher’s task is to organise a process which already occurs spontaneously, to “fill” the students by making deposits of information which he or she considers to constitute true knowledge. And since people “receive” the world as passive entities, education should make them more passive still, and adapt them to the world. The educated individual is the adapted person, because she or he is better “fit” for the world. Translated into practice, this concept is well suited to the purposes of the oppressors, whose tranquility rests on how well people fit the world the oppressors have created, and how little they question it (2005: 75-76).

At issue here is nothing less than the ontological presumption of the human being as either a self-contained being in and of itself that merely exists in the world, or a being that cannot be itself “with[out] the world or with[out] others.” The banking concept of education obviously rests on the former presumption, which further presumes that the process of learning is a matter of representation; that is, a matter of translating the world into a data stream that can be “poured” into and re-presented in the isolated consciousness of students. Such a process “already occurs spontaneously” in daily life as we, isolated receptacles that we are, absorb, process, and retain data from the world around us, but it is the teacher’s job to “organize” this process as a functionary of an educational apparatus, which is itself a functionary of the oppressive power arrangement in our given world. Education’s functional service to this power arrangement, as Freire notes, involves “[regulating] the way the world ‘enters into’ the students,” deputizing teachers (but also other operators in the educational apparatus, from principals and superintendents to legislators and textbook makers) as authoritative arbiters of what sort of knowledge does and doesn’t get passed on. However, from lessons and activities to course materials and evaluations, the specific content of this organized learning, while having much potential for exerting a “domesticating” influence on the (a)critical consciousness of students, is perhaps less consequential than the routinized form of the learning process itself as modeled on the banking concept. “Education can socialize students into critical thought or into
dependence on authority, that is, into autonomous habits of mind or into passive habits of following authorities, waiting to be told what to do and what things mean” (Shor, 1992: 13). Day in, day out, this process continually fortifies and enforces the ontological fiction that people are static, self-contained, “passive entities” who “receive’ the world” in discrete representational forms, thus adapting them to a world that secures its existing power arrangement by ensuring the passivity of the oppressed and the accomplices of the oppressors.

In its varied iterations, and throughout its necessary critical reevaluations, the project of critical pedagogy has maintained a consistent and vital antagonism to this ontological fiction itself, which undergirds the banking concept of education. In the harried and high-stakes race to determine what learning will be in the digital age, however, this ontological fiction has found ever more sophisticated means of universalizing and enforcing itself. That the neoliberal apparatus of “technology-enhanced learning” has materialized a political epistemology that is founded upon this fiction is a case in point. And a critical pedagogy that is up to the task of contesting it must work to relocate the process of learning in the open spaces and soft tissue through which the dialectical negotiation of self and world is eternally mediated. To do so requires that, rather than eliciting a “compliant response to [specific] designed features” (Conole & Dyke, 2004: 302), the task of critically learning with and through (digital) media will necessarily entail exploring the contexts of our own “unfinishedness,” and doing so within the generative matrix of possibility that is afforded by a relation to media that is not prescribed beforehand.

The goal here, of course, is not to give a complete and thorough accounting of the admittedly broad field of critical pedagogy and its many practical and theoretical variations, critiques, divergences, etc., but to tease out the underlying ontological assumptions (we might even say “ontological affordances”) that make the radical project of critical pedagogy conceivable, let alone possible. Doing this work is especially crucial for critical pedagogues as we attempt to find and cultivate spaces where we and our students can develop a critical consciousness of – and the praxical means for intervening in – the diffuse operations of power in our twenty-first-century media-worlds. Because without interrogating the medial conditions that make us who
we are, without feeling out and analyzing the dialectical circuits that open us and our world up to one another, and without grasping that the hope of liberatory learning is not inherent to the educational media we use but, rather, to the mediation of being as such, then we cannot hope to develop a sufficiently critical pedagogy for the digital age. Once again, Morris and Stommel’s arguments in An Urgency of Teachers are instructive here:

The tools we use for learning, the ones that have become so ubiquitous, each influence what, where, and how we learn – and, even more, how we think about learning. Books. Pixels. Trackpads. Keyboards. E-books. Databases. Digital archives. Learning management systems. New platforms and interfaces are developed every week, popping up like daisies (or wildfires). None of these tools have what we value most about education coded into them in advance. The best digital tools inspire us, often to use them in ways the designer couldn’t anticipate. The worst digital tools attempt to dictate our pedagogies, determining what we can do with them and for whom. The digital pedagogue teaches her tools, doesn’t let them teach her (2018).

This is why our focus has not necessarily been on the critical pedagogical affordances of specific digital learning technologies but, rather, on the critical pedagogical importance of openly exploring the matrix of possibility afforded by the very (and varying) ways we relate to technology. As noted earlier, the practical, epistemological, and even ontological violence of the cold neoliberal apparatus of “technology-enhanced learning” is enforced by the deployment of digital learning tools that leave as little room as possible for learning by way of exploring and expanding the potentialities of how we relate to media – and that, instead, dictate, limit, monitor, quantify, and monetize learning for us. And it would be a grave mistake to believe that these barriers to critical learning can be overcome through the incorporation of newer, “better” media into the learning process. It is incumbent upon us, rather, to develop and practice a critical pedagogy that directly challenges the ontological fiction embodied in such techno-fetishist instrumentality. “Digital pedagogy is not equivalent to teachers using digital tools. Rather, digital pedagogy demands that we think critically
about our tools, demands that we reflect actively upon our own practice [...] Good digital pedagogy is just good pedagogy” (Morris & Stommel, 2018).

In the increasingly digitalized classroom, how one practically develops their own critical pedagogy in conversation with students will, of course, vary widely depending on the institutional contexts, the life experiences and literacies collected in said classroom, and so on. But this does not mean that the introduction of digital technologies has somehow rewritten critical pedagogy’s core concern for the “struggle to be more fully human” (Freire, 2005: 47) or its defining ontological assumptions about the mediation of being through the dialectical circuit between self and world. We must be wary if we start to believe otherwise, lest we submit to the same repressive logic by which the neoliberal apparatus of “technology-enhanced learning” reduces the scope of how we define ourselves, our media, and how they relate to one another. The more that our place in twenty-first-century media-worlds is dictated by such apparatuses, which boil our potential relations to new media down to a slate of prescribed uses, the more easily we are compelled to accept and abide by the ontological fiction by which they operate; that is, by the notion that we and the media through which we “learn” are discrete, closed-off, self-contained entities that do not need each other to be what they are. This is all the more reason to appreciate how necessary the project of critical pedagogy is for helping us and our students navigate the contemporary media-worlds we inhabit. Because the project of critical pedagogy is, at base, a media project: a struggle, that is, to find, feel, interrogate, attack, and rework the inextricable, mutually constituting medial connections between human and world. The ontological assumptions underwriting the very hope and possibility of critical pedagogy are nothing if not the essential coordinates for a media theory of being.

Before we can even begin to ask what digital media can do for the project of critical pedagogy, critical pedagogy enjoins us to confront the medial conditions of life itself. As a project of “humanization” that is, from the beginning, a technical praxis of negotiating the enlivened circuitry mediating human and world as they make, un-make, and re-make each other, critical pedagogy drills into the bedrock of media theory from its own distinct angle. The project of critical pedagogy is ultimately based on critically interrogating, working with, and challenging the medial conditions that give historical
shape to the “transductive” relationship between human and world. As such, critical pedagogy eschews the ontological conceptualization of the medium in the same instrumentalist register of a tool whose relation to the human upholds the chauvinistic fiction of a self-contained, isolated subject. Instead, it embraces a conceptualization of the medium, as Mark B.N. Hansen puts it, “as an environment for life” (2006: 299). The project of critical pedagogy, that is, strives for a process of humanization that unfolds through (not apart from) the circuitry of the world that mediate our lives, because it is that mediation of life through the “external” that makes us human in the first place.

“Before it becomes available to designate any given, technically-specific form of conversion or mediation,” Hansen notes, “medium names an ontological condition of humanization – the constitutive dimension of exteriorization that is part and parcel of the transduction of technics and life” (2006: 300). Media theorists like Hansen and Bernard Stiegler take critical pedagogy’s ontological assumptions to their roots; that is, to the “originary” constitution of the human, as such, as a technically mediated being, as a being (a distinct species) co-originated with and through technical mediation. Building on the work of paleontologist André Leroi-Gourhan, Stiegler asserts that human beings have evolved in ways that cannot be explained in purely zoological/biological terms. Our evolution inheres in the passing on of knowledge through externalized cultural worlds, the construction and maintenance of which is made possible through technics. The technical worlds we create, the worlds in which we can live and be, are the very medial support for a non-biological, “epiphylogenetic” memory; thus, the evolution that constitutes us as human is, from the beginning, technical.

The problem arising here is that the evolution of this essentially technical being that the human is exceeds the biological, although this dimension is an essential part of the technical phenomenon itself, something like its enigma. The evolution of the “prosthesis,” not itself living, by which the human is nonetheless defined as a living being, constitutes the reality of the human’s evolution, as if, with it, the history of life were to continue by means other than life: this is the paradox of a living being characterized in its forms of life by the nonliving – or by the traces that its life leaves in the nonliving (Stiegler, 1998: 50).
Stiegler’s description thus presents human evolution as irreducibly biological and technical, occurring as a process of what he terms “epiphylogenesis” (evolution of human life “by means other than life”). The human becomes itself through technical mediation, and human evolution is, necessarily, the “evolution of the ‘prosthesis,’” which is, from the beginning, an exteriorization of the living organism in its pursuit of life by means other than life. “From this perspective,” Hansen argues, “the medium is, from the very onset, a concept that is irrevocably implicated in life, in the epiphylogenesis of the human, and in the history to which it gives rise *qua* history of concrete effects” (2006: 299-300). By the same token, human life is irrevocably implicated in the process of mediation:

Thus, long before the appearance of the term ‘medium’ in the English language, and also long before the appearance of its root, the Latin term *medium* (meaning middle, center, midst, intermediate course, thus something implying mediation or an intermediary), the medium existed as an operation fundamentally bound up with the living, but also with the technical. *The medium, we might say, is implicated in the living as essentially technical, in what I elsewhere call ‘technical life’; it is the operation of mediation – and perhaps also the support for the always concrete mediation – between a living being and the environment. In this sense, the medium perhaps names the very transduction between the organism and the environment that constitutes life as essentially technical; thus it is nothing less than a medium for the exteriorization of the living, and correlatively, for the selective actualization of the environment, for the creation of what Francisco Varela calls a ‘surplus significance’, a demarcation of a world, of an existential domain, from the unmarked environment as such* (Hansen, 2006: 300, emphases added).

From the vantage point of critical pedagogy, as noted previously, the human is necessarily understood as an open-ended *being-in-process*. It is, in fact, only upon such an understanding of the human that any sort of substance can be found in critical pedagogy’s dialectical assertion that the oppressive historical contexts of students’ lived experience and learning dig into and shape the *content* of their humanity. And it is only upon such an understanding that any sort of *hope* can be found in the promise that things can be different. From the vantage point of media theory, the processuality of
our humanity is necessarily understood as being-in-media. Thus, mirroring Freire’s assertion that critical pedagogy “denies that man is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world” and that “it also denies that the world exists as a reality apart from people” (2005: 81), Stiegler argues that “[t]he paradox of being-in-media is to have to speak of an exteriorization without a preceding interior: the interior is constituted in exteriorization ... the appearance of the human is the appearance of the technical” (1998: 141). For Stiegler, the aporetic relationship between “inside” and “outside,” “interior” and “exterior,” “subject” and “object,” can only be understood as difference – a movement of differing and deferral without origin, a transductive synthesis mutually constituting the who and the what while giving the illusion of their opposition.

Media are the passageways of being, the transductive circuitry by which human and world constitute each other as essentially inseparable in “technical life.” Through technical mediation, we “selectively actualize” our environments that actualize us, creating worlds in and through which we become ourselves. “Making worlds is something humans do in order to be human. Our species came to define itself by our need to live in worlds we’ve had a hand in building” (Alvarez, 2018). Just as critical pedagogy posits the open-ended, mutual construction of human and world on its way to deconstructing the ontological fiction of the human as a passive, self-enclosed being underwriting the banking concept of education, so media theory posits life itself as technical mediation on its way to deconstructing the ontological fiction of the human as independent singularity whose humanity is not defined in communion with the world but by instrumental dominion over it. “Humans simply don’t want to give up their self-assigned precious place in the modern cosmological hierarchy,” Dominic Pettman writes (2006: 163). “Those definitions of technology which expel this phenomenon outside of the human sphere, quarantining it in ‘objects’ and ‘machines’ and ‘artificial entities,’ do so according to the logic of apartheid” (2006: 164). And there are consequences. Inasmuch as the banking concept of education traps us in pacified submission to oppressive power arrangements that anesthetize our critical capacities, “ignoring the function, genealogy, and history of those sociotechnical imbroglios [...] that construct our political life and our fragile humanity” (Latour, 1994: 42), hubristically maintaining the illusion that we are always “in the driver’s seat” – that we are always, only, beings in and not with and through the world – blinds us to the ways that the fragility of ourselves and our worlds is harnessed, exploited, and “enframed”
in ways that point to the eventual destruction of both. “Quite simply, then, we are slaves to the notion that we are masters” (Pettman, 2006: 171).

As mentioned previously, the stakes here are quite high. Without closely and critically working through how the mediation of life itself operates as the ontological condition of possibility for the radical project of critical pedagogy as such, we run the perpetual risk of accepting and abiding by the ontological fictions of techno-political apparatuses that have an explicitly vested interest in foreclosing that possibility. “For the most part,” as Paulo Blikstein writes, “schools have adopted computers as tools to empower extant curricular subtexts – i.e., as information devices or teaching machines” (2008: 209). And one can see how, nearly fifty years after Freire published his seminal work, the deployment of digital technologies in the classroom offers new opportunities for re-inscribing the conditions of students’ subjective passivity that Freire linked to the banking concept:

… the traditional use of technology in schools contains its own hidden curriculum. It surreptitiously fosters students who are consumers of software and not constructors; adapt to the machine and not reinvent it; and accept the computer as a black box which only specialists can understand, program, or repair. For the most part, these passive uses of technologies include unidirectional access to information (the computer as an electronic library), communicate with other people (the computer as a telephone), and propagate information to others (the computer as a blackboard or newspaper). Not surprisingly, therefore, the new digital technologies are commonly called ICT (Information and Communication Technologies). In sum, a [critical digital pedagogy] – injecting into a critique of education a subversive political agenda – might position computers, for the most, as commonly recruited by “the system” to inculcate in future consumers the learned passivity that supports capitalism by perpetuating its inherent inequities. Yet, the most revolutionary aspect of the computer […] is not to use it as an information machine, but as a universal construction environment (Blikstein, 2008: 209).
When it comes to learning as the vital process of humanization, digital technologies only “afford” as much as our critical pedagogical relation to them makes possible. As Blikstein notes, students’ capacities to learn with and through these technologies depends on the contexts in which “learning” is defined as either “passive use” or as a matter of creativity and construction that enjoins students to directly engage and explore the medial points where their humanity can be felt in the circuitial flow between “inside” and “outside,” between self and world. From the analog to the digital, education without an active, critical, probing concern for the medial conditions of being-in-process, for the human as an open-ended thing whose being is mediated in and through the world, will further expose the vulnerable humanity of students and teachers to the oppressive forces that aim to pacify and subjugate them, which, in the age of global neoliberal dominance, is “part of [the] broader goal of creating new subjects wedded to the logic of privatization, efficiency, flexibility, the accumulation of capital, and the destruction of the social state (Giroux, 2011: 9-10).

The techno-fetishist conceit that digital media will “enhance” learning on their own rests on the very same ontological assumptions that critical pedagogy and/as media theory aim(s) to deconstruct. In this context, then, to “think critically about our tools,” as Morris and Stommel encourage us to do, is to eschew thinking that presumes tools to be simply “ours” to “use”; it is, rather, to embrace a praxical understanding of such tools, and ourselves, as being situated within the medial networks through which life and self and world become in – and as – flux. Likewise, it is to see that integrating digital media into the learning process ultimately serves to bolster our contemporary conditions of neoliberal domination insofar as they continue to sediment and enforce the ontological fiction of clear distinctions between subject and object, inside and outside, user and tool, human and world. However, as Mark Deuze writes, “If we let go of this deception – this dualistic fallacy of domination of man over machine (or vice versa) – it may be possible to come to terms with the world we are a part of in ways that are less about effects, things and what happens, more about process [and] practice” (2012: xiii). What might it look like, then, to practice a critical digital pedagogy that – as all critical pedagogy inevitably must – fosters and bears witness to learning as the struggle of beings-in-process to become “more fully human,” to learning not as a
matter of “banking,” “using,” “quantifying,” or “testing,” but as “a way of living that fuses life with material and mediated conditions of living in ways that bypass the real or perceived dichotomy between such constituent elements of human existence” (Deuze, 2012: 3)? This, again, is the core of critical pedagogy as such. In any of its multitudinous variations and iterations, the radical project of critical pedagogy is, at base, “a matter of studying reality that is alive, reality that we are living inside of, reality as history being made and also making us” (Freire, 1985: 18). As an extension of the actuated environment in which the technical mediation of life itself takes place, what might it mean to learn to become human in a digitally connected reality that is, itself, “alive”? What might it mean, and what practical forms might it take, if we approach the process of learning with digital technologies as a matter of aiding – of midwifing – students’ development of their own critical capacities to not only read the world as a concept or text, but to intervene in it as the vibrant contexts of their being – not just as an objective “outside” environment in which they live, but as the porous, moveable circuitry mediating life itself, shaping who they are at any given time as they struggle to shape it?

References


Notes


2 “Transduction, following Gilbert Simondon’s conceptualization, is a relation in which the relation itself holds primacy over the terms related” (Hansen, 2005: 299).

3 It is especially helpful to think of the teaching side of the vulnerable educational encounter, as I’ve described it here, in the terms laid out by Jacques Rancière in his (in)famous analysis of *The Ignorant*
Schoolmaster. For Rancière, this encounter will only re-inscribe the inequalities and un-democratic hierarchies in the given aesthetic arrangement of our world if it begins from the presumption of inequality, with the teacher occupying the privileged position of the one who knows more than her pupils and who tries, however genuinely, to reach a state of equal knowledge between her and her pupils through teaching. The educational encounter, instead, must begin from the (democratic) presumption of equality in the capacity to learn with different forms of knowledge and expertise signaling different “manifestations” of common intelligence, which must be used by the teacher to pose questions and to try to help draw out (“midwife”) and bear witness to students’ exercise of their capacity to learn: “Here is everything that is in Calypso: The power of intelligence that is in any human manifestation. The same intelligence makes nouns and mathematical signs. What’s more, it also makes signs and reasonings. There aren’t two sorts of minds. There is inequality in the manifestations of intelligence, according to the greater or lesser energy communicated to the intelligence by the will for discovering and combining new relations; but there is no hierarchy of intellectual capacity” (1991: 27).

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