Promoting Social Justice With CALL

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Over the past 20 years, there have been marked changes in the ways that technology has been used for language learning and teaching. As a result of emerging technologies and their pedagogical applications in the field of applied linguistics, studies in computer-assisted language learning (CALL) have grown exponentially in number and scope. As movement toward integrative CALL, where technological implantation “in every classroom, on every desk, in every bag” (Bax, 2003, p. 21) surely still varies by context, more attention must be paid to the role of CALL in (re)producing issues of power, ideology, and injustice.

In light of the affordances that technology provides, including potential access to “open” and “free” tools for language learning (e.g., MOOCs), a small body of critical CALL research has developed (Helm, Bradley, Guarda, & Thouësny, 2015). Critical CALL draws attention to how such resources can work to ameliorate or, in some cases, exacerbate problems of discrimination, marginalization, and inequity (Andrejevic, 2007; Menezes de Souza, 2015).

As Ortega (2005) contends, the cornerstones of any scientific paradigm must not only include ontology, epistemology, and methodology, but also axiology; that is, CALL researchers must seek to ask ourselves the question: Who is our research serving? More recently, Ortega (2017) has argued that

[O]nce we acknowledge that the majority of the world is multilingual, but inequitably multilingual, and that much of the world is also technologized, but inequitably so, it becomes not only our business, but also our professional responsibility to generate research about language learning and digital literacies for language learning that addresses these problems. (p. 288)

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What does it mean to be inequitably multilingual and technologized? Although the role of technology in potentially exacerbating issues of social injustice has been established (Warschauer, 2003), the consequences of such a “digital divide” are still emerging. In fact, as technology evolves, and our social and pedagogical uses of technology alongside it, we begin to recognize the importance of stepping back and asking the question of how our CALL practices can be more ethically grounded.

As Kern (2014) asserts, “technology is far from a panacea, for although it can provide contact with people around the world, it does nothing to ensure successful communication with them, and some of its particular mediational qualities may in fact work against intercultural understanding” (p. 354). Studies in CALL have long sought not only to acknowledge the potential advantages of using technology for language learning, but also its drawbacks. Studies in critical CALL take this one step further by examining the specific drawbacks associated with technological inequity, or the digital divide (Ortega, 2017; Warschauer, 2003).

Critical CALL then presents an opportunity for “engagement with issues of power and inequity and an understanding of how our classrooms and conversations are related to broader social, cultural and political relations” (Helm, 2015, p. 4). Although these critical approaches are not new to the field of applied linguistics, especially in the realm of critical discourse analysis (Berstein, 1975; Fairclough, 1989; van Dijk, 1993), there is growing attention to how CALL plays a role in “the (re)production and challenge of dominance” (van Dijk, 1993, p. 249). Just as critical discourse analysts strive to “investigate, reveal and clarify how power and discriminatory value are inscribed in and mediated through the linguistic system” (Caldas-Coulthard & Coulthard, 1996, pp. xi–xii), critical CALL practitioners seek to uncover which structures, strategies, or modes of technology-mediated language instruction serve to “enact, sustain, legitimate, condone or ignore social inequality and injustice” (van Dijk, 1993, p. 252).

As Martin (2004) points out, however, critical approaches should not be an endpoint. Both deconstructive (critical) and constructive work are required. In other words, we cannot afford to let our work end with a critical discussion of CALL. In this sense, promoting social justice in CALL must seek to move beyond “hegemony – on exposing power as it naturalises itself” towards “a complementary focus on community, taking into account how people get together and make room for themselves in the world – in ways that redistribute power without necessarily struggling against it” (Martin, 2004, p. 183).

As such, social justice work in CALL must not only explore the interplay between technology-mediated language learning and problems of inequity of power, but also develop constructive solutions to such inequities. Questions
such as To what extent does technology play a role in promoting or ameliorating social inequities in my classroom, school, district? must be complemented with questions that are geared toward finding valuable solutions to the negative consequences of inequities, such as How can I as a teacher leverage the technologies in my classroom, school, or district to promote greater social inclusion?

Being pedagogically driven, the Social Justice Standards (Teaching Tolerance, 2016) provide an anti-bias curriculum framework for teachers and administrators. Their four core areas of work—identity, diversity, justice, and action—may provide a springboard for CALL practitioners to find solutions and promote positive equitable multilingual and technology-related relationships. By focusing on the action area, CALL practitioners have the opportunity to take concrete measures to remedy detrimental impacts of technological inequities.

In sum, we hope that the contribution of this special issue be twofold: (a) to illuminate issues of social injustice exacerbated by technological inequity, and, perhaps more importantly, (b) to spur a discussion that moves the field toward greater inclusivity and social justice. By focusing on these complementary actions, we aspire to ultimately address questions similar to that posed by Motha (2014): How do we participate in CALL “in a way that is responsible, ethical, and conscious of the consequences of our practice?” (p. xxiii). We anticipate that this special issue will incite a broader examination of how to embark on a social-justice-oriented CALL paradigm grounded in questions of axiology, which work toward the promotion of equity, access, and social justice. With four articles, this special issue takes a social-justice approach to CALL by concentrating on the topics of social media pedagogy (Anwaruddin), digital game-based learning (Blume), macro-level discourses of language and digital technologies (Hellmich), and blogging and language ideologies (Song).

The first article in this special issue, by Sardar Anwaruddin, is titled “Teaching language, promoting social justice: A dialogic approach to using social media.” Inspired by critical CALL that seeks to challenge the established practices by exploring the impact of broader socio-political, cultural, and economic factors on world language education, the author suggests adopting a new perspective on using social media for language teaching. Following an examination of how social media has been traditionally used in language education and how it is currently employed for various political purposes to create “information cocoons” and “echo chambers” in which social media users are exposed to filtered information and views from like-minded individuals, Anwaruddin proposes a dialogic approach to teaching world languages with the help of social media. This approach, which is rooted in a pedagogy of serendipity (i.e., “chance encounters among conflicting ideas and worldviews”)
and contingent scaffolding, strives to engage language learners in an open dialogue on social media by exposing them to a multiplicity of voices through serendipitous encounters with a vast array of perspectives. As contended by the author, such a dialogic approach has the potential to promote social justice and democratic principles, and also prepare language learners to become more objective, socially-responsible, and justice-oriented citizens.

In the next article titled “Playing by their rules: Why issues of capital (should) influence digital game-based language learning in schools,” Carolyn Blume explores digital gaming practices and attitudes towards gaming among English as a foreign language (EFL) educators. In her investigation, she focuses on studying the reasons why language educators tend to marginalize digital games and the implications of such marginalization for language learners and their learning. Drawing on the concept of habitus (i.e., “individuals’ socially and culturally acquired and ingrained behaviors and sensibilities”), Blume argues that through their reluctance to utilize digital games, language teachers disenfranchise language learners by depriving them of certain motivational and sociocultural benefits that digital game-based language learning (DGBLL) has for the development of L2 learners’ linguistic capital. In light of the popularity of digital gaming predominantly among working class youth, differential access to games may create unequal opportunities for the learners’ development of linguistic capital. In the meantime, Blume warns that the integration of digital gaming into a language classroom does not automatically promote equity and justice for everyone; in fact, games can “easily reinforce disempowerment” if the pedagogy around them is not designed to, for example, critically examine, or even counter, certain ideologies that games may convey. Similar to Anwaruddin’s appeal for the need to avoid putting learners in echo chambers and, instead, engage them in an open dialogue on social media through a pedagogy of serendipity, Blume’s article appears to intimate that language educators should accept the reality that digital gaming is here to stay and embrace its affordances and benefits for language learning rather than place themselves in echo chambers and deny learners opportunities to acquire linguistic capital through DGBLL.

Emily Hellmich’s study “A critical look at the bigger picture: Macro-level discourses of language and technology in the United States” examines the 2017 American Academy of Arts and Sciences (AAAS) report titled “America’s languages: Investing in language education for the 21st century,” which was commissioned by the U.S. Congress to study the nation’s language education needs. By utilizing critical discourse analysis, the author seeks to investigate how language and digital technologies are positioned in the report and what implications their positioning has for the field of CALL. The findings of this analysis reveal the presence of a neoliberal discourse in the AAAS report
that assigns multiple roles to language and digital technology. In particular, technology is viewed as a valued commodity, priority, and key instrument for improving language education in the United States. Furthermore, bolstering language capacities is seen as an essential element of U.S. national security and competitiveness on the global arena. While the AAAS report also deems language to be a component of national equity and heritage, it fails to heed the historical marginalization of linguistic minorities in the United States. In her discussion of implications, Hellmich avers that the macro-level discourses of language and technology in the AAAS report have a strong potential to impact CALL practices and create inequality through neoliberal, market-based mentalities. As a result, she urges CALL researchers and educators to be more critical in examining the underlying reasons for technology implementation in language education and resist neoliberal tendencies by cultivating social responsibility and promoting social justice in CALL research and praxis.

Blogging and language ideologies is the focus of the last article by Rayoung Song, “‘This may create a zero-lingual state:’ Critical examination of language ideologies in an English learning blog.” In this virtual ethnographic study, Song explores the shaping, manifestation, and dissemination of language ideologies in the blogosphere. Unlike previous research that focused primarily on exploring the use of blogs for language learning in classroom settings, Song’s study has been carried out in a non-instructional setting, with the target audience being an online community surrounding a popular Korean blog dedicated to English language learning. Using Gee’s (2014) situated meanings for analyzing the discourse of the blog owner who is a native Korean speaker and her followers who are motivated to master English, the author investigates their beliefs and opinions regarding how language is learned and should be used and, more importantly, their language ideologies on bilingual practices. The results evince a dominance of monolingual ideologies and a strong opposition to translanguaging by the blog owner and her followers. Song notes that although such views, at first glance, may indicate that the bloggers advocate for social marginalization of bilingual speakers who engage in translanguaging, there are in fact valid arguments explicating their opposition to translanguaging. In discussing the implications of her study, the author asserts that open online spaces such as the blogosphere can create opportunities for language learners to engage in democratic conversations about the issues that are relevant to them and she calls for more CALL research on language ideologies circulating in such spaces and their justification.

In sum, many questions remain regarding our role as social-justice-oriented CALL theorists and practitioners in finding solutions to fundamental social, political, and economic problems. A future research agenda for social-justice-oriented CALL could be guided by the following questions:

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What solutions can CALL provide to the potentially negative impacts of neoliberal policies on world language education, such as the redistribution of fiscal resources and disinvestment in public schooling, the positioning of students as consumers rather than critical learners, and further marginalization and exclusion of disadvantaged groups from quality education?

What is the interplay between normalization in CALL and social, political, economic issues? How can CALL expose and address these issues?

How do technology-mediated pedagogical practices align or misalign with more recent efforts toward promoting a socially-oriented, culturally-embedded view of language and learning? What are the affordances and constraints of institutional policies and existing national standards for CALL?

What can we as CALL theorists and practitioners do to narrow the digital divide and promote equity? What changes in our praxis can help us better tackle social, political, and economic problems? What technological, human, economic, and social resources are essential for this mission?

How are decisions about technology and language learning at the classroom (micro) level influenced by and, in turn, how do they influence departmental (meso), institutional, and broader social, political, and economic (macro) levels? What role do such decisions play in the (re)production of power and control? What solutions are possible?

Although this special issue, *Moving forward with CALL to promote social justice*, propels forward our discussion of the role of technology in language learning contexts in order to problematize and propose solutions to issues of inequity, marginalization, and social injustice, it is hopefully just the beginning of a larger discussion, whose goals include proposing constructive resolutions to multilingual and technological inequities.

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