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# Lessons On-(the)-Line
## Blended Learning and Pedagogy of (the) Digitally Oppressed

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**Abstract** In this essay, I explore the meanings and implications of blended learning in an era of global pandemic by extending Paulo Freire's notion of a "pedagogy of the oppressed" into the digital milieu and COVID-19 era of the 21st century. In doing so, I critically meditate on how Freire's cue is reformulated in the context of online teaching while situating questions about online learning in the context of the Blended Learning Online South Africa (BLOSA) project based at the University of Witwatersrand. I do so as a means for tracking how, in material practice, blended learning operates in the context of knowledge dissemination and postcolonial poverty.

**Keywords** Blended learning. Digital. Pedagogy. Online. Teaching. Oppressed. Students.



In memory of Paulo Freire

## 1 Hacking Hierarchical Learning in Blended Learning Forums

Can there be such a thing as excellent teaching in a challenging world in which the threat of disease and necessity of social distancing socially warrant a pedagogy designed by separation? Can educators rationalise the

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growth of 'distance learning' while also retaining the intimacy that lies at the heart of social justice praxis? These opening questions, which this essay explores, surface in my title, which intentionally places 'the' in parentheses to signify the ways in which the meaning of both lines of my title are framed by variable, signified meanings. That is, in both lines, 'the' operates as both a joiner and a separator of the production of meaning when we critically meditate on the innovative and restrictive interfaces between 'technology' and 'learning' – another semantic collocation whose meaning is presumed in the term 'learning technology'. By disrupting the phrases in the above title with 'the' as a semantic variable rather than hermeneutical preclusion, I linguistically signal from the outset that notions of 'online' and 'pedagogy' do not dwell in a fixed, canonical epistemology. This textual gesture is perhaps a reasonable manner of embarking into a paper that critically meditates on blended learning as a contemporary and innovative approach to teaching.

Blended learning interweaves online and traditional teaching methods, both synchronous and asynchronous, with classroom pedagogy, and commands an acute sense of urgency during the global COVID-19 pandemic. This disruption in my paper's title, then, meaningfully resonates with Paulo Freire's thinking in his pioneering study, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In that revolutionary text, Freire describes "pedagogy of the oppressed" as "a pedagogy that must be forged with, not for, the oppressed (whether individuals or peoples) in the struggle for their liberation. And in the struggle this pedagogy will be made and remade" (Freire 2000, 48). He further details that

> The pedagogy of the oppressed, animated by authentic, humanist (not humanitarian) generosity, presents itself as a pedagogy of humankind. Pedagogy which begins with the egoistic interests of the oppressors (an egoism cloaked in the false generosity of paternalism) and makes of the oppressed the objects of its humanitarianism, itself maintains and embodies oppression. It is an instrument of dehumanization. This is why, as we affirmed earlier, the pedagogy of the oppressed cannot be developed or practiced by the oppressors. It would be a contradiction in terms if the oppressors not only defended but actually implemented a liberating education. (48)

Freire's observation links pedagogy with the psychic bonds of power relationships that exercise permeability between classroom and the world while centralising 'human' as a category. In my own interpretation and research, I read and apply Freire's notion as describing class and hierarchical relationships in the world that often replicate

themselves in the universities.[1] In this context, a key observation is that universities can *specifically* be sites of alienation, even if unwittingly. This is a very current issue in South Africa, for example, with conversations about transforming and decolonising the way universities work in fundamental ways beyond the removal of statues or the window-dressing of curriculum, content, and delivery method. I would thus signal from the outset the technology gap in universities at different sites around the globe wherein access to technology, wifi, electricity, lack of computer literacy, poor command of English construct a kind of digital oppression which I return to later in this essay.

Indeed, Freire's observation instructionally resonates with the lives of enslaved, indentured, and/or colonised peoples assimilated by the imperial whip of colonial languages, among other cultural impositions. In literary imaginings from Shakespeare's Caliban in *The Tempest* to Mary Shelley's Monster in *Frankenstein*, English literacy, for example, is both an anathema to and cure of assimilation. Thought that emerged from the Enlightenment period was notably marked by orientalism and racism perpetrated by "the overbearing, oppressive demeanour of the [Western] colonising powers" (Clarke 2002, 191). Freire's call for oppressed peoples to forge an organic modality of learning in today's global crucible of second wave COVID-19 outbreaks is urgent during global movements, led by students, young people, millennials, and Generation Z, against anti-Black factions. It is moreover a timely historical moment in which we can critically meditate on how to best develop a technique of decolonial pedagogy in sync with tactics of blended learning whose formats complement teaching materials, strategies, and methodologies.

However, in moving forward with Freire's notion that it is "a contradiction in terms if the oppressors not only defended but actually-implemented a liberating education" (2000, 48), it behoves us to critically reflect on what this means in the timely context of the university classroom in the age of COVID-19 and its impact on both face-to-face teaching and learning technologies. But beyond being situated in this context, per se, the university classroom is often a contact zone within which participants encounter society's hierarchies on a micro, versus macro, scale with others and within themselves. Developing countries have inherited educational systems developed in the West and imposed by colonialism and which continue to operate in the interests of capital, and these spaces and epistemologies and cultures of learning have been criticised for their Eurocentric biases etc. in South Africa for example. With this in mind, we can consider

1 See Gairola 2014 for more on this in the context of postcolonial classrooms that are disciplinary and Gairola 2016 for the ways in such learning spaces are meant to invoke comforts and exclusions of 'home'.

students as the pedagogically oppressed, or at least disempowered, in the top down, teacher-student binary of power relations. In other words, this paper rhetorically reads students as oppressed/dispossessed agents of change in the historical context of COVID-19 and in the skewed power relations routinely spatialised in the university lecture hall and tutorial room.

These fixed material spaces are timely spatial counterpoints to the unmoored learning forums promoted by blended learning models and the migratory freedom of mobile learning applications. Material and online spaces are counterpoints precisely because they offer solutions that not all learners can afford while those who do have them are often targeted by thieves, especially in 'developing' contexts; as such, the very accessibility promoted by these models often stifle the accessibility that they herald. In the context of differing learning spaces, we should from the outset acknowledge the overwhelming hegemony that the English language holds across these digital platforms even in the mobility of learning and teaching praxes. In addition to hacking hierarchical structures, including power relations that promote racism, classism, xenophobia, sexism, queerphobia, etc. in what follows, I explore the meanings and implications of blended learning in an era of global pandemic in the context of the Global South. To this end, in the next section I extend Freire's notion of a "pedagogy of the oppressed" into the digital milieu and COVID-19 era of the 21st century. The goal of doing so is to meditate on how Freire's cue is reformulated in the context of online teaching during a global pandemic that has been punctuated by disturbing xenophobic and racialised incidents worldwide.

In closing the essay, I attempt to situate these questions of learning in the context of the Blended Learning Online South Africa (BLOSA) project based at the University of Witwatersrand as a means for tracking how, in material practice, blended learning operates in the context of knowledge dissemination and postcolonial poverty. I briefly focus on Africa and Asia, two continents that widely experienced Western colonialism, and which have experienced what Kang Minhyung describes as a "global smartphone craze" that "has led to an explosion in internet use, ushering in a mobile phone era" (2010, 79). I conclude with a necessarily cursory manifesto for blended learning during the COVID-19 crisis and the responsibility of students and teachers alike to assume global citizenship in re-thinking and actioning social justice from the classroom to mobile apps in and through a strategic merger of blended learning pedagogical praxis with the critical pedagogy advocated by Freire and others.

## 2 Defining a Pedagogy of "the Digitally Oppressed"

Some teacher-scholars describe a pedagogy of the "digitally oppressed". Given the historical and geographical context of this essay, it is helpful to critically meditate on definitions of this term in the context of Freire's oeuvre. In her master's thesis paper at the University of Twente, Samantha Mariel Valenzuela Hernández writes:

> I conceptualise "digital oppression" as the technologically-mediated process where oppressor/oppressed relationships take place. Critical reflections about technologies can uncover these processes, which are regularly obscured due to narratives that frame technologies as neutral. When technologies are taken for granted, little attention is paid to hidden dynamics that prevent people to consider the way technologies shape their lives. For instance, digital learning mirrors a problematic model of education where the development of a critical consciousness is hindered because students are not encouraged to think for themselves. (2018, 29-30)

In the context of the above passage, Hernández is justified in noting that technology itself can embed undetected biases that present themselves as 'equity'. For example, I know from personal experience that not all students have PC and/or laptop access at home, or the financial resources to afford data fees and costly hardware. Some, indeed, may not even possess the ubiquitous smartphone that seems to be a staple appendage of 21st century bodies. Because of varying demands with jobs, family, finances, and political crises, the digital milieu can be oppressive to rather than facilitatory of multimedia, online learning content. For example, during the BLOSA conference from which this volume has emerged, participants lived in mortal fear that the electricity would cut out because of the breakdown of our state energy provider; this fear punctuated the unsuitability or limited applicability of blended models developed in the Global North in contrast to our developing contexts.

I experienced similar fears when teaching in northern India during the monsoon season (June-September), when torrential downpours and high winds warranted unpredictable, rolling power blackouts 2-3 times a day. I learned the hard way that we must compulsively save all work on computers and not take for granted the availability of power sources. Beyond such impact factors on learning technology like equitable and public access to electricity, Hernández's notion of "digital oppression as the technologically-mediated process where oppressor/oppressed relationships take place" also arguably occurs far beyond the control of both students and teachers – before any of us have even turned on the computer. For example, in her highly influential study titled *Algorithms of Oppression* in which she careful-

ly charts out the situated biases coded into search engines, Safiya Umoja Noble writes that

> human and machine errors are not without consequence, and there are several cases that demonstrate how racism and sexism are part of the architecture and language of technology, an issue that needs attention and remediation. (Noble 2018, 9)

In making this observation, I would argue that Noble's concerns link to those of Hernández (2018, 29-30) in conceptualising "the digitally oppressed" in demonstrating a history of biases that is implicit to the very information technologies that most users take for gospel at the interface of teaching and learning in the digital milieu. In simple terms, "the digitally oppressed" encompasses not only the conditions and resources that shape accessibility, but moreover the very information that we seek through myriad search engines to find information. We may thus say that knowledge production is mediated through the technological phenomena of algorithms, which Noble forcefully demonstrates are, like the cartoons and filmic representations that precede them, anything but objective mirrors of the real world. We thus see that the complications and difficulties of dealing with technology in the classroom are mired with political, ideological, geographical, and even climate factors that we in the Global North often do not think twice about.

Similarly, Mong Palatino issues a warning about how "the digitally oppressed" can be exacerbated and consolidated by technology through the very semantics of "diversity", "inclusion", and "accessibility". He writes:

> Diversity is equated with plural perspectives reacting to popular memes. Hence, the danger of limiting classroom discussions to topics that are viral and trending, even if these do not represent the lives of students. The valid aspiration to be relevant and seen could end up in a frantic race for cyber attention. This has harmful consequences to students who might wrongly assume that their life stories have to garner social media boosting as a prerequisite for acceptance in society. Or they could disown their local cultures, habits, and ideologies because they diverge from the popular norm. They might reject their framing of the world because it does not adhere to existing categories or it is deemed archaic for digital sharing. (2020)

Palatino's keen observation compels us to view blended learning in the context of "the digitally oppressed" as what Jacques Derrida has famously called, while drawing on the Greek philosopher Plato, the "pharmakon" – both an antidote and a poison (1981, 115). That is, blended learning pedagogical praxis dramatically revolutionises the

reach, scope, and possibilities for equitable education while it simultaneously marshals learning and teaching praxis into resources and variables that are not accessible to all. We cannot presume a stable connection, fast internet access, reliable hardware, requisite software, and/or weather conditions that routinely impact connectivity during seasonal weather cycles beyond the West and into the Global South.

Once that connection is achieved, we must be cognisant of peer pressure linked to social media access, as Palatino observes, as unwitting catalysts of digital oppression. In my reading, it is potentially misguided to assert that internet connectivity is a prerequisite for blended learning pedagogical lesson plans in the Global South. Educational technology and associated applications already exercise vast potential to transform the global education sector with, in the example of Saudi Arabia, iPads that can facilitate English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching lessons (Elyas, Al-Bogami 2019, 147). Thus, the irony and ambivalence of "the digitally oppressed" – the oppression itself can be a function of lack of digital resources while also being the key to whole new worlds. This is especially true in 'developing' countries with massive rural populations including India, which has 400% more mobile users than desktop users (*The Quint* 2018). This fact suggests that many people may not be able to afford their own PCs and/or that mobile phone culture is not only a trend in India but also a daily necessity for managing other forms of domestic duty.

This would indeed be the case with India's ballooning youth population and the rise of connectivity across rural plans of the subcontinent. But how to infuse effective, blended learning technology even when internet access is compromised? In "Portable India. A Vision of Responsible Literacy in Digital Democracy", Rahul K. Gairola and Arnab Datta write:

> For example, portable mediums that are light weight, reliable, and which provide high density data storage can be realized in extremely small chips, and can be designed to be climate resistant. Such alternatives to digital archives that employ both flash and allied memory chips, which users can easily access exclusively through their mobile phones, eliminate dependence on Internet connection. State of the art memory technologies support novel technological trends in the Digital Humanities, not only in terms of the resources but also for efficient archival of them. This will make digital literacy in rural India feasible in the immediate future rather than relying on bandwidth sensitive internet connection. We recognize that a move away from pervasive internet usage seems counterintuitive, but so is the combination of our disparate fields that can improve digital literacy in rural India. (2015)

Here, we signal a kind of blended learning that steers clear of dependence on internet access while at the same time deploying technological tools for delivering lesson plans in remote parts of India with minimal use of expensive hardware – what Stacie Williams calls "minimal computing for maximum impact" (Williams 2018). We have conceived of a way of utilising mobile phone storage capacity, versus internet connectivity, to promote blended learning pedagogical praxis in remote villages across the subcontinent. This counterintuitive move to disaggregate technology from connectivity, we argue, is especially feasible and effective in rural communities wherein even an educational film can be projected on a schoolroom wall through the storage cards of a mobile phone (Gairola, Datta 2015). As such, I would suggest that blended learning should not be equated to the false assumption that online network access is warranted to engage in it.

Indeed, this vision of "Portable India" focuses on practical transferability rather than internet connectivity (Gairola, Datta 2015). I thus further focus on mobile phone use as a pedagogical tool at the intersection of blended learning, on the one hand, and "the digitally oppressed" on the other, in the geographical context of Africa and South Asia. With respect to the former, Jenna Delport opines, "digital transformation needs trusted and transparent partnerships because the public sector doesn't have the bandwidth to unwrap the nuances of digital to ensure it gets the best results" (2020). I would concur with Delport that digital transformation in countries like South Africa and India can be more challenging than in the West but given the comparative lack of resources and connectivity it is fair to say that blended learning pedagogies hold great promise of increasing education and literacy. Institutional equality and systemic white supremacy as the social reside of the colonialist project moreover appear to thematically unite India and South Africa as case studies worthy of comparison. This is perhaps most evident due to the prestigious tertiary institutions of higher learning that were established in both nations by the British Empire during colonial days.

For example, in briefly considering the move to racially integrate previously white universities in the latter, John Sharp and Rehana Vally take as an example the University of Pretoria. The co-authors detail that, for decades, apartheid was justified through the semantics of "a different culture" rather than "racial difference" (Sharp, Vally 2009, 5). Such semantics are a bit odd given that there are 26 universities with very different backgrounds and approaches in South Africa. For example, the apartheid mentality seems to be echoed in the student-led "Fees must Fall" movement, which linked up with the "Rhodes Must Fall" movement, amalgamating into a joined campaign for free, public higher education. As observed by I. Konik and A. Konik, #FeesMustFall advanced demands for free tertiary pub-

lic education for all in late 2015, eventually dovetailed with the calls for decolonisation that drove the #RhodesMustFall campaign (2018, 575). This history of universities in South Africa speaks to the ways in which the racial and economic differences under apartheid exacerbated conditions of oppressed, Black students beyond the clutches of colonialism.

## 3 Blended Learning with Mobile Devices

We can also say that these socioeconomic conditions nurtured by apartheid parlayed into the formation of "the digitally oppressed" merely decades later. We have defined "the digitally oppressed" above but the definition could benefit from a coherent, guiding sense of what I mean by "blended learning". In "Blended Learning in Indian Higher Education. Challenges and Strategies" Punam Bansal cogently offers the following definition, characteristics, and goals of blended learning in the geopolitical context of contemporary India:

> Blended learning combines online with face-to-face learning. The goal of blended learning is to provide the most efficient and effective instruction experience by combining delivery modalities. The term blended learning is used to describe a solution that combines several different delivery methods, such as collaboration software, Web-based courses, EPSS, and knowledge management practices. Blended learning also is used to describe learning that mixes various event-based activities, including face-to-face classrooms, live e-learning and self-paced instruction. These technologies have created new opportunities for students to interact with their peers, faculty, and content, inside and outside of the classroom. (2014, 3)

Bansal's definition highlights the ways in which blended learning strategically draws upon learning technologies that attempt to combine, rather than replace, in person student interactions with digitally enhanced components that have a wider reach than the constrictions of the time-space continuum. Strategical blended learning techniques have allowed me to host reputable scholars from different parts of the world as both guest lecturers for recorded long talks with no student interaction and as guest provocateurs in online dialogues using Zoom, Blackboard Collaborate, and Microsoft Teams. They have moreover reconfigured the home relationships of both traditional and mature age students in managing their family and personal lives while safeguarding them from potential exposure to the COVID-19 virus.

In Sivangi Dhawan's words, in the contexts of educational institutions in India,

> Combining face-to-face lectures with technology gives rise to blended learning and flipped classrooms [...]. Students can learn anytime and anywhere, thereby developing new skills in the process leading to life-long learning. (2020, 6)

But I would further argue, in extending mitigation against "the digitally oppressed", that we must also recognise how the most banal uses of daily technology produce learning moments on the go that are generated at users' fingertips. That is, even mobile phones with limited or no data connections can store enough pedagogical media to deliver robust lesson plans on hand-held devices, let alone smart phones with storage capacity harnessed to the universe of information available through search engines and geographical information systems designed for smart phones. My contention is perhaps more vital in the historical context of the COVID-19 pandemic than ever before, especially given the virus's disproportionate spread in the Global South and the alarming social articulations of racism that have attended it.

For example, Anthony G. Picciano describes travelling to South Africa in May 2014 to engage with "a federal government mandate to expand higher education opportunity to its citizens and had asked the public universities for strategies for doing so", while including tertiary education topics including "student outcomes, faculty workload, and blended learning in large section classes" (Picciano 2016, 1). He further states,

> Online technology allows teaching and learning literally to occur at any time and anyplace, and no longer shackles one to the time and place constraints of a physical classroom. Critical aspects of instruction such as media-infused content, group interaction, reflective practice, simulation, and assessment, are augmented with online technology. A course discussion never ends, student must be prepared to interact with colleagues in online forums where all can and are expected to contribute, and facilitated collaborative learning is commonplace. The new technologies have opened up many "frontiers" for pedagogues to explore as they convert or redesign their courses. (3)

In the above passage, Picciano compels us to see the ways in which the time-space continuum can promote pedagogical oppression in the context of new learning technologies. For Picciano a blended learning approach addresses the oppressiveness that is implicit in the "shackles" instituted by the time-space continuum in learning spaces. This academic observation in the context of augmenting the ways in which professors critically meditate on the various levels of "oppression" layered in myriad student experience. Anticipating "the size and range of the opportunities" of student learning with mobile

technology, Ellen D. Wagner opines that "[n]o vision of the future of learning is complete until we can imagine the power of converged digital and mobile technologies for education, training, and performance support" (2012, 41).

This accessibility to pedagogical resources through the mobile smart phone and its suite of apps simultaneously allow users to engage with diverse learning and social communities based on marginalised affiliations including gender and sexuality. In citing a few research studies whilst examining the interface of mobile technology and university education across Africa, Rogers Kaliisa and Michelle Picard write:

> The other positives of using mobile technologies in higher education include social and emotional presence, as well as pedagogical change where learners are able to learn anytime and anywhere, through mobile learning which has emerged as an innovative learning approach. Mobile learning makes learning more enjoyable, flexible and interactive since learners are not rendered immobile by the restrictions of desktop computer technology or the traditional classroom settings. (2017, 2)

Such technology, in other words, can facilitate pedagogical interaction while it allows queer users, for example, to avail safe resources and spaces in navigating from the streets into virtual safe houses while mediating against social exclusion (Gairola 2018, 101). This means that mobile technology can also facilitate safe and private accessibility to course materials that students may feel anxious or embarrassed to consult in material learning spaces like libraries, lecture halls, tutorial rooms, and/or break-out student groups. It enables and facilitates 'on-the-go' digital literacy without requiring a data connection (although this would be a requirement for interacting with hypertexts). Such varying perspectives, then, suggest that one way to step out of the conundrum of oppressed pedagogy is in and through the digital promise of mobile phone application technology in the continuing development of online curriculum resources.

Kaliisa and Picard moreover note, in regards to South Africa, that the greatest amount of African studies of blended learning approaches through mobile phone use have been conducted, which reflects that

> mobile phones are as common in South Africa as they are in the USA with over 89% owning a mobile phone and the country has a well-developed telecommunication infrastructure as compared to other African countries. (2017, 9)

This statistic shows the pervasive use of mobile phones in South Africa, as in India, as a means of accessing instructional resources and

lessons from the congested urban metropolises from New Delhi to Johannesburg. As such, the interface of learning with life is potentially always on the go and always traceable. While this undoubtedly has its own drawbacks, as in the critique lodged by the notion of "the digitally oppressed", it also renders an unprecedented and unique flexibility to knowledge transmission and interactive response.

In delineating the three major types of blended learning models, Charles R. Graham describes enabling blends that focus

> on addressing issues of access and convenience, enhancing blends that "allow incremental changes to the pedagogy but do not radically change the way teaching and learning occurs. (2012, 13)

Graham moreover argues that such blends

> allow a radical transformation of the pedagogy – for example, a change from a model where learners are just receivers of information to a model where learners actively construct knowledge through dynamic interactions. These types of blends enable intellectual activity that was not practically possible without the technology. (13)

Graham's distinction between types of blended learning modes allows us to critically meditate on and apply the one that may best serve "the digitally oppressed" in navigating the specific challenges of postcolonial life in the digital milieu for students in both India and South Africa who yet live and learn amidst the detritus of British colonialism. That said, I would conclude with the caveat that neither in this section or throughout this essay am I intending to represent nor homogenise the totality of tertiary education in South Africa, India, or indeed of the Global South.

## 4 Digital Humanities and Blended Learning in the Global South

In offering a blended learning case study to illustrate how it mediates against the reification of "the digitally oppressed", I introduce the field of digital humanities to think through theory, praxis, and pedagogy in higher education in the digital milieu. This section thus begins by briefly introducing the digital humanities, and subsequently examines how it seeks to excavate the power relations that frame both technological innovation and traditional humanistic enquiry. In the "Quantifying Digital Humanities" infographic, the University College London website features data compiled by Melissa Terras stating that digital humanities research and teaching takes place at the intersection of digital technologies with the traditional humanities (Terras 2011). In offering a pithy working definition of digital humanities, I would characterise the field as an exploration of the synergistic relationship between the traditional humanities, on the one hand, and the STEM fields on the other hand. In this symbiotic and productive relationship between the STEM fields and the Humanities, both are radically transforming the ways in which the other functions and operates today.

My working definition of digital humanities is significant when we think about the geographical and historical context of postcolonial nations (including India and arguably most African nations) as their technological development today is yet profoundly shaped by their colonialist pasts. These arguably continue to exercise a disproportionate amount of influence in these global arenas today and invoke what Roopika Risam has developed into a critical heuristic called postcolonial digital humanities. In her formulation of this critical lens with reference to digital pedagogy, Risam writes,

> Like digital humanities pedagogy more generally, postcolonial digital pedagogy challenges the reigning practices in humanities classrooms [...] through engagement with the theoretical concerns of postcolonial theory and the interpretation of postcolonial literary and cultural texts, emphasizing the relationship between colonialism and knowledge production. (2019, 93)

Risam's observation is especially important in the Global South, in general, and for postcolonial countries, in particular, namely those nations in Asia and Africa.

This is important not merely for exploring the many possibilities of how to define the digital humanities but also in the very narrative of how digital humanities came about. What we see are, arguably, orientalist and colonialist tendencies: that the very narratives to describe the genesis of digital humanities have limitations that are ar-

guably orientalist (Said 1978, 31). There is a dominant history of hypertext (Sano-Franchini 2015, 54), as it feeds the digital humanities, that reflects the field's tenuous definitions and links to dominant narratives concerning its own inception. The hegemonic narrative centres around an Italian Jesuit priest named Father Roberto Busa: According to Marija Dalbello,

> the most significantly early employment of computer resources in the humanities was the *Index thomisticus* concordance to the works of Thomas Aquinas initiated by Father Roberto Busa, and it became the basis for the published and database versions of the concordance and is considered the first electronic text project in the humanities. (2011, 481)

Dalbello further details that the project began as a government-industry scholarly partnership launching the first generation of IBM's large-scale digital calculating machines for research work nearly two decades before the computing industry started expanding its reach to everyday life. In 1946, Father Busa went to see CEO Thomas Watson of the IBM Corporation in New York City because he wanted to harness the power of Watson's punch card system to compile an index of the collected works of St. Thomas Aquinas. According to Steven Jones, IBM viewed Father Busa's work in data systems as an initiative "to help humanize technology at the height of the Cold War" (Nyhan, Passarotti 2019, xv). In 1950, Father Busa revealed his plans for an index to the works of Thomas Aquinas, requesting "any information […] about such mechanical devices as would serve to achieve the greatest possible accuracy, with a maximum economy of human labor" (Burton 1984, 891, cited in Dalbello 2011, 481). This 'origin story' bound up with Father Busa is the traditional tale of the global rise of the digital humanities (Schroeder 2019, 318).

Yet, it is indeed a story that, in Steven E. Jones' words, ensconces a "complicated history […] even in Father Busa's own accounts" (2016, 3). The punch card system as developed by IBM and promoted by Thomas Watson (and then of course used by Father Busa) is itself quite problematic given that Nazi Germany was deploying it to tabulate and keep track of the mass extermination of Jews in the concentration camps of Dachau, Auschwitz, and beyond (Black 2001, 60). However, I would concur with Jones' observation that other historical moments, ones that underscore the domination of different territories in both Africa and Asia during the apex of British colonialism and its gradual demise in the ashes of World War II, offer counter genealogies of the development of the digital humanities. As I have elsewhere argued in much more detail, this 'genesis narrative' of Digital Humanities could be displaced by other narratives that emerge from histories of colonialism and technology, including the innova-

tion of cinema and the Bollywood film industry in pre-independent India (Gairola 2019, 462).

This situated history profoundly shapes the rise of Digital Humanities and the need for postcolonial Digital Humanities in the formulation of an enriching blended learning experience for students in South Africa, India, and other regions of the postcolonial Global South which face similar challenges. To return to my earlier example of teaching in northern India, this is a region that was also sociopolitically wracked to this day by the British Raj's division of it. This is what makes very significant the notion of a "long partition" introduced by Vazira Zamindar in which the end of partition has not yet occurred; it's an ongoing long-term process of official engagement by both India and Pakistan (2010, 2-3). In *The Long Partition*, Zamindar "unsettles national closure" (7) by arguing that migration, return, and belonging are ongoing but constitute an omission of the contingencies of bureaucratic violence that produce the meaning of separate nations and states. I thus drew on Zamindar's concept when engaging in blended learning to speak not only about oppressive and unstable borders that are geopolitical, but moreover those that ostensibly separate different modalities of learning between the Global South and the Global North. Since I was teaching at an Indian Institute of Technology, this analogy was immediately palpable and observable outside of our institute's main gates.

## 5 Conclusion. Typing Truth to Power

In conclusion, I believe that we can engage with blended learning praxis to meaningfully engage a pedagogy of the oppressed as well as "the digitally oppressed". Freire's original work is highly significant in the frame of learning technologies of the 21st century in ways that have very real and reflective ramifications for the material realities of the world today. Learning technologies combined with postcolonial methodologies in and beyond literary theory and Digital Humanities have the potential to bring the world and the past into a wired classroom even if this is not always possible with respect to our disenfranchised students lacking mobile phone access in the Global South. While I have herein given brief examples of South Africa and India, I do realise that these are differing case studies of colonialism and the institutionalisation of tertiary education in both places.

Indeed, varying factors including types of colonialism (settler colonialism that destroys and displaces Indigenous peoples and cultures versus traditional colonialism that enforces hegemony and resource extraction to the Western imperium), and experiences of racism/colourism differ yet matter. This is because they profoundly shape access to education and technology in divergent ways across the Glob-

al South, which cannot simply be relegated to a monolithic swathe of Black and Brown populated land masses. Even when dealing with the diasporas of Africa and Asia, we must mindfully engage "the critical turn in cosmopolitanism" in pedagogy not only to the service of classroom praxis but also with respect to "the social, political, economic and cultural ambivalences, obstacles, inequities and competing interests involved" (Surma 2013). We must concede that there are indeed inadequacies of Western approaches to Digital Humanities and blended learning in developing contexts that emerge specifically from the very historical contexts that yet disadvantage the Global South to the Global North in matters of learning technology.

Blended learning, through the often-perceived cold calculus of technology, can indeed expose both students and teachers to the balance of emotional trauma and territorial conflict that many of us can often abstract and distance ourselves from since we are not a part of those epochs or lands. Engaging in a pedagogy of "the digitally oppressed", in other words, means accessing the pain of historical imperialist ventures that imbibe colonialism in and through digital media and resources made possible by learning technologies today. It is in this context that I would respectfully conclude by asserting that in the 21st century, university educators must understand why a model for postcolonial digital humanities is urgent with respect to both blended learning and "the digitally oppressed", if we are to secure both virtual and material equity and accessibility at pedagogical sites around our shared world. For it is in this shared material world that learning best occurs not only when it is blended, but when we – as creatures marked by difference – are blended by all means possible, especially in the era of a global pandemic, in the interest of productive tension that nourishes intellectual development.

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