



Teachers Integrating Technology: Sometimes, They Don't

Juliana Q

Content warning: discussions of cultural assimilation, mention of abuse

Nowadays, most educators are required to take classes on technology. Working teachers are regularly sent on retreats to learn about the new stuff, while teachers-in-training like me get special tech courses. Just last year I was enrolled in “Integrating Technology in Education” (or something like that), a class with a special focus on using technology to meet the needs of diverse students.

Fun fact: looking at a crowd of education majors is like peering into a weird cloning experiment. We kind of look like carbon copies of each other. I can only speak from my experience, but I attend one of the top 10 largest universities in the United States (with a teaching program that draws students from all over the world), so I feel like my sample size is decently large; and that sample size is primarily white brunette women who are able bodied, neurotypical, cishet, and from the suburbs (and by suburbs I mean, like, the nice suburbs, the ones where families go to church every Sunday and Disneyland every Spring break). Sometimes, if you're lucky, a few of us are blonde. Or men. For maybe 80% of us, that's about as exciting as we get.

So when I was in that technology course I was quick to mention an idea I was excited about: why not use the Internet to connect students to role models in their community? Especially for students who come from backgrounds with a lot of stigma, seeing people like you succeed can make it easier to envision and chase after your own success. Being engaged in social issues surrounding your community can also increase self-worth, passion, and motivation. For students who might feel more isolated or unable to be themselves, online communities can foster a sense of belonging and acceptance that home or school may not provide. There's plenty of evidence pointing to the advantages of online communities for marginalized groups...



So it seemed pretty strange that I was the only one advocating for them. In fact, most of the times I mentioned online communities I was met with nervousness. In the case of my classmates, the idea wasn't engaged with at all; there would be a beat of silence before a shift in the conversation, the whole room figuratively and literally turning their heads away.

And I have a few guesses as to why that may be.

1. Educators don't realize some communities exist (online or otherwise).

Like the education majors I generalized before, I'm a white person who grew up surrounded by other white people. My school was more diverse than other schools in my area, by which I mean our student body had more than five people of colour. (Because of this, other districts thought our school had rampant knife fights and gang violence. I'm not making this up.)

Everything around me was homogenous, but I still knew of marginalized communities...out of necessity. I was one of few out queer students in my district; but at least with 'out-ness' there was some aspect of visibility. Other parts of me remained hidden, like the abuse at home and the growing number of mental disabilities I didn't have language for. It was reaching out to the Internet—for answers, for kinship, for the promise that I was not irreparably broken—that I survived high school and felt capable of navigating the future ahead. Growing up without examples or explanations or people like me, those online communities were absolutely vital.

Other communities took me longer to find. But as I recognized myself as someone who would most likely be serving groups I wasn't a part of, I found it important to make an effort to surround myself with their voices and educate myself on some of the issues that were important to them. Unfortunately, most of the educators I've run into haven't made that effort.

According to the Public Religion Research Institute's 2013 American Values Survey, 75% of white Americans have a completely POC-free social network feed. I haven't found statistics for the presence of other minority groups, but you could say I have a good guess at what the results might look like. In the years that I've been pursuing special education I've met countless teachers, researchers, and specialists in the field, and each and every time I always ask one question: Do you ever talk to disabled people outside of work?



The answer, 100% of the time, has been an awkward, shuffling, gaze-avoiding no.

I could easily fill an entire article with all of the angry disabled feelings I have about this, but instead I'll say this: I don't think educators fail to engage with the communities they serve purely because they don't think they need to. The problem is that most spaces that the average person with privilege grows up frequenting are also filled with other privileged people, so they're never really exposed to anyone different from themselves. This doesn't always change while getting their teaching degree.

I'm aware that there are communities built around oppression because I'm a part of some of them. While I'm obviously not a participant in every social sphere, I can assume other identities have their own spheres because, well, that just makes sense. But if people in your circles are mainly united by fishing or car appreciation—if the facets of your identity are so built into the popular culture that they are regarded as 'default'—then this might actually be hard to comprehend.

In a class where my fellow education majors and I read Beverly Tatum's article "Why Are All the Black Kids *Still* Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?" the title itself was news to my colleagues. It completely boggled their minds. In their world, the cafeteria looks like it did on TV: with everyone of every race sitting at each table. Or, it probably did; their schools most likely didn't have enough diversity to spread across a table. But if they had, surely everyone would be intermixed; *after all, we're all color blind, right?*

Of course, these teachers do see the groups. On the street, at the mall, while volunteering at more diverse schools than they grew up in. When these groupings are seen, it's subconsciously filed away as 'trouble'.

2. Educators don't want some communities to exist.

So maybe you're a teacher and you're somehow aware that of the concept that people who share common experiences tend to group together. You might also be aware that your disabled students lack the access, independence, and/or mobility to find spaces with other disabled people, or that the students under the LGBTQIA+ umbrella think something is wrong with them. You might be aware that there are students from racial minorities who might be struggling with internalized oppression, students with cultural or spiritual beliefs they never get to talk about or see reflected around them, and students coming from home



lives that make them think they have no chances of escaping to anywhere better. You might see all this and think about the role models they could be connected to, and then think of the wonderful powers of the internet, and then think, “nah.”

You'd never say that, of course. Because that would sound bad! And as we all know, teachers are never, ever bad.

It's with no ill will that the existence of certain communities is seen as undesirable. It's just that, you know, students being involved in minority communities could mean strengthened group belonging. And strengthened group belonging could lead to a higher involvement in social movements. And that could lead to radicalization.

According to many of the leading theories behind education, radicalization is bad. It is simply not good. Functionalism, a founding theory for many systems of education, believes the school system is a structure meant to prepare students to properly contribute to society. Many other theories and educational philosophies have different ideas of what that means or what the true purpose of education is, but they tend to lean in similar directions. But how will students go on to support society if they're mad at it for oppressing them? No, that is simply bad news. And for the majority of teachers who come from Privileged People Land, it is also vaguely threatening.

So introducing students to online communities is not an exciting idea. The idea of the communities existing at all, at least when you're a teacher who believes in the fundamental pillars of education, is also not great. Education wants students to feel like they belong—to their classroom, to their school, to their society—but not to any particular group.

3. Educators value assimilation.

The history of education has often been synonymous with the history of assimilation. In many countries, the first schools were created largely to instill a common code of conduct and values; if service to society is a pillar of education, than assimilation is another pillar that is just as big. (Actually, it might be the exactly same pillar.) Schools were often a tool of cultural assimilation and played no small part in the subjugation of peoples and their ways of life, 'Indian boarding schools' being a prime example.



No modern teacher wants to believe they're continuing that history, but they are. It shows in various ways, from the reluctance to connect students with their communities to the very way educational systems are structured.

For many special education teachers, the thought of being *proud* to be disabled is to ultimately dismantle our field. The special education system not only exists to help disabled students fill knowledge gaps and learn life skills—it teaches how to fit in and be 'normal'.

But a student connected to disability advocacy might start believing all sorts of zany ideas. They might want to stim—to flap their hands and rock and sway—in public! They might want to sign instead of undergo the rigorous speech therapy necessary to make life easier for everyone else! They might want to not use all of their time and energy blending in with the rest of the world—might think that there's *nothing wrong* with their disabled traits! Entire treatments and curriculum are based on the need for disabled people to hide everything about them that's different; disability pride destroys all of that. The very idea is counterintuitive to the system, which is exactly why you can still find some schools where special education students aren't aware they are disabled at all and simply assume they are bad at being normal.

This applies to other groups as well. Go to prom with the proper person, wear the proper uniform, speak the proper way, act the proper way: schools want students to learn the rules. To listen to the authority figure. They want students to find certain mannerisms more professional than others, and to recite certain versions of history. These biases are not based in 'common sense', and they certainly aren't random. They enforce certain ideas, values, and ways of existing. They are tools for assimilation.

But we have other tools at our disposal.

I am queer and disabled, but outwardly I look like any other education major. I mock them partially because I find it funny, but also because I blend in almost *perfectly* and that scares me. I'm just another white feminine brunette in the big Education Major machine (and I even grew up in the suburbs, though my family never took me to Disneyland).

My experiences won't equip me to connect with every student I teach. But as long as I'm being encouraged to integrate technology into my teaching, I want to help my students find communities to be a part of. The internet helped me know that I wouldn't always be the



token queer, that others like me existed somewhere outside my small neighborhood; and when media told me I was crazy and weak and destined to be locked away, the internet showed me people with my same diagnoses and backgrounds who went on to live fulfilling lives.

I want every student to know all of the possible futures ahead of them. I want them to know the long past behind them. I want them to know the scholars and advocates and professionals that are creating language for their experiences, and I want them to know the experiences they might find alienating might be someone else's normal, might be normal for hundreds of other people who exist and live and survive.

I want my classmates to want that too. I want the teachers and professionals I talk with to want it. And whatever reasons make them hesitate aren't nearly as important.

Still treading the line between self-advocacy and candid overexposure, Juliana Q is a queer and disabled writer, performer, artist, and activist. While their work normally focuses on mental illness, survivorship, and identity, they occasionally put on a happy face and dip into the realms of comedy and education. They have been published in *The Tower*, Plain China Press, and Z Publishing House, and have had their poetry shared by Button Poetry.