NORRAG

Network for international policies and
cooperation in education and training

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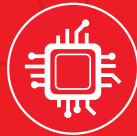internationales en éducation et en formation

POLICY INSIGHTS

THE DIGITALISATION OF EDUCATION

ABOUT THE PROJECT

NORRAG's work on the digitalisation of education aims to surface fresh analytical perspectives and under-represented expertise about digitalisation and its consequences for education globally. Despite resurgent interest in technology in education research, policy, planning and practice, many areas that are critical to understanding the challenges as well as the benefits of the ongoing digitalisation of education remain understudied, and the evidence that does exist remains under-shared.

This publication developed from an ongoing collaboration with the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education that aimed to inform her 2022 report: *The impact of the digitalisation of education on the right to education.* NORRAG convened a nine-month multi-disciplinary expert consultation process that mobilised and distilled learning for education policy and practice from critical and under-represented research and evidence, including from the Global South. This collection shares short pieces authored by participating experts, who provide profound yet digestible insights about the digitalisation of education and its consequences for learners, communities, practitioners and policy makers, and trace future pathways for change and transformation.

More information: www.norrag.org/digitalisation-of-education

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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We are deeply grateful for the time, energy and insight of all of the experts who contributed to the consultation process on the digitalisation of education. Equally, we would like to thank all those who worked on the expert consultation process and the production of this publication. A full list of all those took part is available online here.

In particular, the efforts of Guillaume Dumas, Cristiano Nabuco de Abreu and Serge Tisseron in helping us explore a research gap at the intersection of digital education and health is greatly appreciated.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

A full list of the 24 experts who contributed to this publication, including their biographies, is included at the end of this publication. This publication is edited and introduced by Anna Numa Hopkins, Policy Engagement Lead at NORRAG, and Moira V. Faul, Executive Director at NORRAG. A foreword to the publication is provided by Koumbou Boly Barry, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education.

ABOUT NORRAG

NORRAG is a global network of more than 5,000 members for international policies and cooperation in education and training. NORRAG is an offshoot of the Research, Review, and Advisory Group (RRAG) established in 1977 and at the time funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and Swedish International Development Authority (Sida). It was charged with critically reviewing and disseminating education research related to the developing world. The current name was adopted in 1986. Since the move to Switzerland in 1992, NORRAG has been significantly supported by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC)and the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, and more recently, the Open Societies Foundation (OSF).

NORRAG's strength lies in addressing underresearched questions of quality and equity in key issues in education and development, and in amplifying under-represented expertise particularly from the South. NORRAG's core mandate is to produce, disseminate and broker critical knowledge and to build capacity for and with the wide range of stakeholders who constitute our network. Our stakeholders from academia, governments, NGOs, international organizations, foundations and the private sector inform and shape education policies and practice at national and international levels. Through our work, NORRAG contributes to creating the conditions for more participatory, evidence-informed decisions that improve equal access to and quality of education and training.

NORRAG is an associate programme of the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva.

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AN INTRODUCTION TO CRITICAL DIGITAL PEDAGOGY

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Key takeaways: what can education decision makers learn from Critical Digital Pedagogy?

- Critical Digital Pedagogy helps us understand education systems more holistically.
- Critical Digital Pedagogy reminds us to take time to deeply understand the material, social, and political circumstances of students.
- Critical pedagogies rely on supportive infrastructures.
- Critical Digital Pedagogy helps us examine tacit assumptions about how humans learn and what teachers and institutions can do to differently to better support that learning.

Critical pedagogy asks that we consider the specific idiosyncratic experiences of students and teachers before imagining that there are simple solutions to issues of equity and access in education. The cost of education and other geographical, social, and political barriers inhibit broad and diverse engagement. We know, for example, that already marginalized students are more likely to face significant barriers. There are both policy and pedagogical responses to this problem.

Before we talk about curriculum, content, or assessment design, we have to start with a consideration of basic needs, asking whether our students had breakfast that morning or if our teachers are being paid a living wage. This becomes especially critical as more of our work moves online, which often results in students and teachers being separated from necessary supports. Digital education, offering educational opportunities in more and new modalities, can increase access (and remove barriers), but only if we critically interrogate our technologies, digital pedagogies, and engage more thoughtfully with students.

Critical Pedagogy is focused on helping students become "readers of their world," in the words of Paulo Freire, able to critically interpret their material and political circumstances in order to make effective change.[66] This puts education right at the heart of questions of citizenship. Critical Digital Pedagogy asks how and to what extent students can be full agents in their education when it is mediated in digital space. For example, can reflective dialogue flourish within web-based tools, social media platforms, or learning management systems? Can we build platforms that support learning across age, race, culture, gender, ability, geography? What are the specific affordances and limitations of technology toward these ends?

Consider a technology like the learning management system (or virtual learning environment), which has become nearly ubiquitous in some countries and is seeing growth around the globe. As of 2015, Educause reported that 99% of institutions in the U.S. had adopted a learning management system.[67] According to *Business Wire*, the global learning management system market is expected to grow from 13 billion in 2021 to 31 billion by 2027. What pedagogies are at the foundation of these systems? How does the structure of these systems influence how teachers engage with students and how students engage with one another? Many of these systems have an architecture that is structured around a grade book, reducing students to rows in a spreadsheet and their work to columns. How does centring grades and instrumentalising student work change the nature of our work in education? These are the kinds of questions at the heart of Critical Digital Pedagogy.

What can education decision makers learn from Critical Digital Pedagogy?

> Critical Digital Pedagogy helps us understand education systems more holistically. For example, education decision makers need to consider ways to invest in faculty preparation and support, not just new technologies. This can be done by creating new funding programs and grant initiatives that encourage pedagogical research and educational outreach, and also by committing to a permanent, non-contingent academic workforce.

> Critical Digital Pedagogy reminds us to take time to deeply understand

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the material, social, and political circumstances of students. This requires continuing research to create a fuller picture of students and their material circumstances.

> Critical pedagogies rely on supportive infrastructures. To support broad engagement, we need digital infrastructure that mirrors the social and community supports students find at bricks and mortar institutions: advising, teaching and learning centres, emergency aid, disability resource centres, offices of diversity, etc.

> Critical Digital Pedagogy helps us examine tacit assumptions about how humans learn and what teachers and institutions can do to differently to better support that learning. For example, it offers ways we might re-imagine assessment, moving away from standardized, quantitative approaches and toward flexible practices designed for equity.[68]