

### Title of Project:

Digital Identities, Educational Inequities: Investigating Social Class and New Literacies of Migrant Filipino Youth in the Knowledge Economy

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### **Final Report**

#### **Motivation for the Research**

More than three decades after Heath (1983) published her ground breaking ethnographic study comparing the literacy practices of black and white working-class communities and mainstream townspeople in the U.S., the world has drastically changed. Technology has not only facilitated the rapid transnational flow of people, capital, and ideas (Appadurai, 1990; Basch, Schiller, & Blanc, 1994), but also reshaped both the meaning and practice of literacy (Cope & Kalantzis, 2012, 2013; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006, 2012). By enabling the growth of diverse semiotic modes, cross-language interaction, and new forms of social interaction (C. Luke, 2003; Warschauer, 2009), it has permeated all aspects of human life and constituted new identifications, allegiances, and relations. In a knowledge economy where production and services are largely based on information processing and knowledge creation (Powell & Snellman, 2004), technology has become the critical factor in generating and accessing power (Castells, 2010). Structuring a new work order where classes of knowledge workers emerge, it has warranted the acquisition of new literacies that have become necessary for upward social mobility (Jones & Hafner, 2012). Responding to this current landscape, education is confronted with new challenges as it prepares students to fill the labour needs of this knowledge economy. As schools have become focused on building digital infrastructure and integrating technology into curricula, the achievement gap between rich and poor children in the U.S. has been increasing to twice that of white and black children (Jones & Vagle, 2013). How this class-inscribed trend is linked to the convergence of technology and education demands further examination. In this increasingly digitally-mediated world, we need to ask who are developing the literacies that matter and who are at risk of being left out? It is precisely these issues of educational equity that this study investigates.

### **Research Questions**

Focusing its analytic gaze on migrant Filipino youth in Vancouver, this study examines, in the context of the knowledge economy in the following ways: (1) the intersection of technology, literacy, and social class—the latter being a construct inadequately theorized in language and literacy education (Block, 2012; Block, Holborow, & Gray, 2012); and (2) the impact of this convergence on educational theory, policy, and practice (Cummins, Mirza, & Stille, 2012; Hornberger & Johnson, 2007; Norton, 2013).



Because technology seeps into classrooms and becomes an integral part of the educational system, this study ultimately seeks to understand how such innovations can develop new literacies while reproducing certain inequities, and, thereby, ineluctably altering the social trajectories of learners in the 21st century.

To understand the educational and social ramifications of the different ways digital literacies are developed and valued, this research poses the following research questions:

1. How do social class differences of Generation 1.5 Filipino migrant youth shape their investment in digital literacies?

- Are there class-based views on the purpose of technology and the relevance of specific digital literacies?
- How is the development of digital literacies shaped by the possession of varying levels of economic, cultural, and social capital?
- In what ways do different digital literacies provide learners with varied contexts for second language acquisition?

2. To what extent do personal devices, home settings, and mentors shape these digital literacies?

3. To what extent are digital literacies developed at home recognized and valued in educational policy and pedagogical practices?

By addressing these questions, this study seeks to understand the digital literacy practices of migrant youth from diverse class positions, the ways in which they are socialized into these practices, and how these practices can position them in school.

### **Research Methodology**

Data in this study were collected through the following methods:

- 1. *Participant observation*, which included observing how participants would use digital devices at home, in the classroom, and in virtual spaces. Low inference descriptions of these observations were recorded in field notes, where I also reflected, raised questions and theorized on what was being observed.
- 2. *Questionnaires*, where learners provided demographic information, including details about the devices, apps, and programs they use.
- 3. Interviews of students, teachers, administrators, and parents. These interviews were semistructured e.g. asking students about the devices or apps they use, or narrative e.g. asking students to recount their migration experiences or their educational trajectories. Some interviews were conducted as students demonstrated and explained their digital practices. In this case, their own social media profiles, pictures, etc. served as elicitation devices during these interviews. Each interview took 45 to 60 minutes, and were recorded using Voice Memos on iPhone, and then transcribed using Express Scribe.
- 4. *Group discussions*, where focal participants from a particular school gathered together to discuss and exchange ideas regarding their digital practices. In this situation, the students were gathered in a circle, and I would begin by asking a specific question, and students responded as they pleased.
- 5. *Journals*, where learners jotted down their own experiences and reflections on their own digital practices, with guide questions provided at the beginning of the research period. In some cases

where participants were not able to keep a journal, they wrote on journal sheets where they answered questions regarding their technology use.

6. Digital artefacts, which include digital texts produced by the focal participants (e.g. photos or social media posts), or screen captures of websites or apps that the focal participants were using while being observed. In many cases, I took pictures of the artefacts themselves, and would ask for the permission of the student each time. Taking a picture of the digital artefact as it appeared on a particular device served both practical and methodological purposes: I would not have to rely on the participant to connect with me online and send the artefacts, and these pictures allowed a visualization of these artefacts in both their digital and physical contexts. I collected more than 150 photos of these artefacts, including those of teachers.

#### **Summary of Findings**

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What the study has confirmed unequivocally, through observations of the digital practices and dispositions of the learners, is that one cannot ascribe a single, neutral digital competence to these "digital natives." While many of them may be adept in digital practices that serve recreational and relational purposes, there is still much for them to learn to expand these practices to encompass the full range of digital affordances and to extend operational skills to a more strategic and critical competence. The popular binary opposition of digital native and digital immigrant (Prensky, 2001) has the power to erase how these diverse literacies are distributed across a spectrum, operating through cultures-of-use and ideological attributions of value. Because of the dichotomizing nature of these constructs, some teachers become convinced that they cannot achieve "native" competence, while students themselves assume adeptness has been thrust upon them by virtue of their being part of a generation that was born into technology. By accepting this essentialized notion, learners may be convinced that their existing digital literacies already encompass the full extent of technological potential or that these digital literacies are acquired effortlessly. What this study asserts, however, is that while some learners may be socialized into digital practices and cultures-of-use that are valued by schools and teachers, there are those who do not necessarily have the social and cultural resources that comprise digital repertoires necessary for more agentive technology use. As power operates in both physical and digital contexts and in the hidden layers of sociotechnical structures and algorithmic processes, how learners are able to negotiate their various resources can determine their access to and participation in diverse online spaces. Students' unequal digital repertoires determine modes of inclusion and exclusion and their capacity to acquire new forms of economic, cultural, linguistic and social capital. At the same time, a lack of awareness of these differences and an uncritical understanding of what comprises digital literacies can contribute to technology-centered educational policies and curricula that duplicate neoliberal discourses of individualism, deregulation, consumerism, and ultimately reproduce social inequalities.

#### Implications

In laying the foundations for digital infrastructure and technology centered learning standards in schools, policymakers need to employ a critical lens to recognize the situatedness of technology use. How technology is perceived and used varies not just within a particular classroom, school, or pedagogy, but also within the social and cultural conditions of out-of-school contexts (North, Snyder & Bulfin, 2008; Prinsloo & Rowsell, 2012). An autonomous notion of digital literacies assumes that they have a general applicability and operate in a general manner, regardless of local configurations. Assuming this generality and universality of function and practice, however, disregards the "differentiated, situated and enculturated ways in which digital practices happen" (Snyder & Prinsloo, 2007, p. 173). Policy makers need to be aware that technology choices have social and economic implications, privileging



some and marginalizing others. Hence, the construction and implementation of policies such as bring your own device (BYOD) or flipped learning require an understanding of how learners access and use technology in unequal ways. Educational policies need to consider these inequities to ensure that technology integration in curricula and pedagogy does not exclude, but provides agentive possibilities for, learners of different social backgrounds.



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