Teaching and Learning Beyond the Margins: Designing toward Justice-Oriented Media Literacy

Cherise McBride, University of California, Berkeley; *NCTE member since 2016* @cherisemcb
Remi Kalir, University of Colorado Denver; *NCTE member since 2018* @remikalir
Christina Cantrill, National Writing Project; *NCTE member since 2010* @seecantrill

A group of K–16 educators convened in the summer of 2021 for Youth Media Beyond the Margins (YMBTM), a week-long professional learning workshop about curriculum development and critical digital literacies. Janie—a secondary educator who also taught at a local community college—chose to revise her course *African American Studies: The American Experience, 1865–1945* by incorporating contemporary youth media and journalism. One of Janie's goals was to shift how her students wrote final essays and demonstrated their learning. Janie sought to reimagine a course that would "invite my students to write for themselves about something that matters to them" and "position students as real analysts and creators of new media." Within YMBTM, Janie joined other literacy educators ready to enliven their curricula through critical pedagogy and new social practices: "We are often isolated in our profession and that can lead to some stagnation of curriculum."

> ***Janie sought to reimagine a course that would "invite my students to write for themselves about something that matters to them" and "position students as real analysts and creators of new media."***

A core component of YMBTM was educators' analysis of multimodal youth journalism published by YR Media—a national network of young journalists and artists—including interviews, podcasts, and photo essays. Janie focused on youth journalism about Black Lives Matter, including the article "Young Black Journalists Envision a Media Revolution" (Robinson, 2021). The article reflects on the need for diversity and equity in journalism and is based on interviews with young Black journalists from across the US. In revising her course and curricula, Janie wanted to put present-day youth journalism, like Robinson's article, into conversation with other texts she taught, such as historical news articles by Black journalists who wrote for the *Chicago Defender* or who, at the time, covered the 1921 Tulsa massacre. Text pairings between historical content and contemporary youth media came "naturally" according to Janie; what made YMBTM different was the "possibility for play" with new literacies combined with "this excitement around building curriculum." And Janie's excitement to change curricula was, ultimately, intended to benefit her students: "I want them to be in conversation with each other . . . in a way that's very different than what I was expecting of them when they were just sort of writing in isolation."

In fall 2021, Janie taught the designed lessons in her African American history class and integrated the literacy practices she had worked on over the summer. For example, during YMBTM, participating educators shared their curricular musings with one another, often through the use of interactive documents. One common activity was collaboratively authored learning plans designed toward student production of digital stories. Janie's YMBTM contributions and her subsequent teaching invited students to read journalistic mentor texts by young people like themselves to model grammars of digital media including text conventions, word choice, voice, and speaker-audience relationships. Her new lessons demonstrated critical interrogation through questioning of authorship and ideology: *How did Black news media cover stories differently than mainstream news outlets? Why might this have been the case? Whose voices and experiences are remembered through journalism and whose are excluded?*

During her fall teaching, Janie led her students in comparing the piece "Credo for the Negro Press" (The Editorial Board, 1944) with "Chicago's Summer 2020 through the Eyes of a Young Photographer" (Frazier, 2021), a YR Media article about a photographer documenting protest, community, and "joyful" narrative in a self-published book. This pairing connected past and present while illuminating how multimodality, new media texts, and counternarrative are integral to critical digital literacy (e.g., Lee & Soep, 2016). Simultaneously, Janie's students were invited to consider equity of voice in journalism's history. At the conclusion of her course, some students' stories were pitched to YR Media for publication or were shared through social media to amplify their visions of more just world-making.

Justice-Oriented Media Literacy

We begin with this description of Janie's YMBTM participation and her subsequent teaching because there is an ongoing need to document what equity-oriented professional learning for critical literacy can look like in practice. As learners, teachers are often forced to navigate predesigned, mandated professional development that represents a one-way transmission of knowledge. However, more

equitable approaches to literacy teacher education involve centering teachers' knowledge and repertoires of practice—as professionals—so as to facilitate consequential learning and collective efficacy (e.g., Skerrett et al., 2018). For a literacy educator like Janie, YMBTM made her feel "honored" and "excited" as she developed new curricula and engaged deeply in coauthoring practices guided by youth interests and commitments to justice.

What made YMBTM, and the subsequent pedagogies that it encouraged, possible? And, more broadly, how might we as teacher educators design professional learning that challenges lingering inequities in literacy education and envisions the most just media literacy? We suggest doing so through a commitment to *justice-oriented media literacy*. Our work builds on the fact that "new perspectives are urgently needed in ELA to help teachers critically engage media and popular culture to avoid continued harm and to center students as critically engaged members of a new digital social reality" (Lyiscott et al., 2021, p. 2). Moreover, the NCTE Task Force on Critical Media Literacy (2021) has advocated for "critically analyzing media texts and institutions with emphasis on the relationship between power and knowledge" (p. 4). Accordingly, justice-oriented media literacy enables the critical analysis, use, and production of media to enact more just learning futures.

YMBTM was designed to encourage justice-oriented media literacy through professional learning given a developing research-practice partnership between YR Media and the Bay Area Writing Project, a local site of the National Writing Project. The motivation to advance justice-oriented media literacy through YMBTM reflects our prior critical literacy efforts (Kalir et al., 2021) as well as other factors familiar to teacher educators. Briefly, educators often face curricular constraints exacerbated by conventional approaches to professional development that delimit creativity and agency. There is a need to honor the expertise of educators and invite critical opportunities to think expansively about literacy education. Justice-oriented media literacy can honor educators' repertoires of practice, deepen collegial relationships, and also encourage students' authorship of both their learning and new sociopolitical narratives (e.g., Turner & Griffin, 2020).

Designing Justice-Oriented Media Literacy

How might other teacher educators design new initiatives in response to their professional circumstances and communities that encourage justice-oriented media literacy? With the hope of informing other critical literacy efforts, we now present five "building blocks," or design commitments, that were integral to YMBTM and that, we believe, can inform similar professional learning. These commitments include authorship, commentary/annotation, text pairings, digital technology, and disciplinary content, the latter two of which bear particular implications across school-based learning contexts. While each block on its own represents an important facet of critical digital literacy, these five commitments—collectively represented in Figure 1—establish the structural integrity necessary to support more just professional learning.

Authorship

First, professional learning that encourages justice-oriented media literacy intentionally disrupts normative constructions of authorship and authority. In the lessons she put together, Janie invited students to practice authorship as well as engage digital creations of other youth authors they were able to access through the YR Media site. Justice-oriented media literacy invites learners' (both students and teachers) knowledge and ways of knowing as valuable sources of creation and interrogation. This approach stands in contrast to traditional understandings of authorship posed in schools: the invisible author who presents an objective truth (Trimbur, 1990), or the writer who must be traced and uncovered in text.

This type of authorship is normalized in curricula that privilege canonical texts and textbooks as legitimate and supreme. Students' relationship to the author becomes one of searching then, as they are prompted to read and decode texts in search of the author's meaning and knowledge to be received. Given teachers' own backgrounds as students, these framings are often treated as a foregone conclusion in typical ELA instruction, reproducing normalized ways of learning. In Janie's case, and in YMBTM broadly, students themselves were positioned as authors of digital compositions and not just consumers of content. As part of their engagement with youth media, Janie's students were invited to "pitch a story to YR Media," which several did.

Figure 1. Justice-oriented media literacy curriculum "building blocks."

Authorship extends to teachers as well; through their collegial process, they created interactive lesson plans that can be shared and remixed by other educators. In YMBTM teachers drew from their existing practice, authored their practice, and affirmed the authority of their own knowledge. A justice-oriented media literacy encourages us to imagine students as authors of critically engaged texts, teachers as authors of learning experiences, and both in conjunction as coauthors of curriculum that is consequential to students' lived realities.

Commentary/Annotation

Second, justice-oriented media literacy guides reader response to texts through critical commentary and questioning. During YMBTM, participating educators used the annotation technology Hypothesis to read, comment on, and discuss youth journalism from YR Media that represented counternarratives to traditional news coverage and analysis (Figure 2). In the margins of the digital text, teachers shared their wonderings about the ideas and the youth authors themselves. Educators' commentary and annotation of youth journalism helped YMBTM participants to further develop their critical digital literacies, ask questions of the written word and world, and pose questions about (counter)narrative through reading and writing. The literacy practice of annotation—the addition of notes to texts—invites reader response by questioning authors, commenting on authority, making connections, sharing emotions, and constructing meaning "in the margins" (Kalir & Garcia, 2021). While often associated with handwritten documents, annotation can be expressed using digital tools as both a social and multimodal aspect of literacy professional learning (e.g., Kalir et al., 2020). We understand reader response, and specific practices like annotation, given a Freirean perspective on how people interact with texts of the word and the world: "There is a permanent movement back and forth between 'reading' reality and reading words—the spoken word too is reading of the world" (Freire, 1983, p. 18). Professional learning for justice-oriented media literacy encourages annotation by both educators and the students they teach.

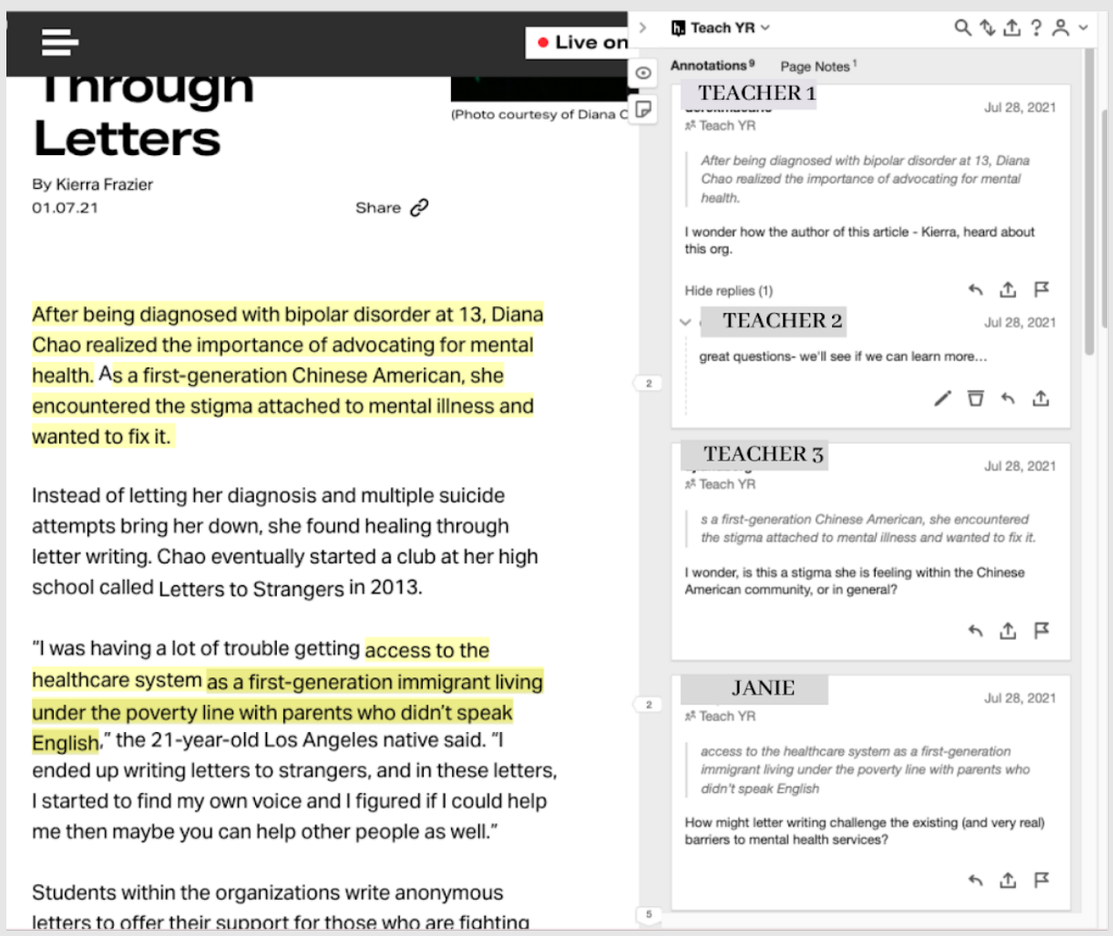

Figure 2. Example of educator commentary from YMBTM using social annotation.

Text Pairings and Youth Media

Third, educators' development of justice-oriented media literacy includes recognizing the capacity of youth media to disrupt discourses of power. This can be accomplished through text pairings as an act of "remix" whereby the assemblage of new and old texts helps rewrite and produce new discourses (Jocson, 2018). Such pairing of media texts reflects integrated reading and writing practices and is predicated on the stance that justice-oriented media literacy must also "envision media consumption and production as symbiotic partners" (Mirra et al., 2018, p. 16).

During YMBTM, educators built from youth voice, and collectively brainstormed how they might use youth journalism from YR Media, asking: *How might my students relate to this? How does this media connect to other texts I teach?*

At the same time, teachers were offered theoretical frameworks of integrated multimodal reading and writing as a generative process. By engaging with youth media that had been created through an out-of-school learning space (in this case, YR Media), teachers learned from students' organic practices as they occur beyond the constraints of school expectations such as grades, standardized tests, and academic demands. These practices reveal powerful youth literacies that are already at work in youth's everyday ingenuity (Gutiérrez et al., 2017). We as teachers need to engage such media alongside texts that broaden youth's literacies to include different genres, perspectives, and formats. We do this by building on what they already know—their translocal practices, remix, layering, and other digital media literacies—and also expose them to wider repertoires of practices, texts, and ideas.

Digital Technology

Fourth, justice-oriented media literacy must account for dynamic communication landscapes. Language, media forms, and literacy practices continue to shift with the proliferation of digital tools. In

turn, designing learning experiences requires knowledge of digital tools, learning affordances, and the ways tools may be taken up in everyday practice for meaning-making. In school contexts, these aims are often reflected in curricular standards for digital technology and digital literacies.

Janie's lessons not only met but exceeded standardized expectations for digital technology integration, especially through her engagement of justice-oriented content and practices that inspired her students' social action in culturally relevant ways. For example, Janie prompts students to think about Black journalism and their place in its evolution. She describes wanting them to "think not only what does it mean to carry on the long tradition of Black journalism [but also] how are young journalists using *new* forms of media to cover stories? So thinking beyond the traditional print newspaper into this whole new world of Tik Tok, Instagram, etc." Thus, Janie's pedagogical focus on learning history and analyzing shifts in these traditions in a digital landscape guides her incorporation of digital tools and media in her class. Yes, her students are supported in skills framed as "Digital Citizen" or "Creative Communicator," but they are also encouraged to consider the sociohistorical contexts of what digital media afford—an important distinction of justice-oriented media literacy that is grounded in culture.

We suggest that justice-oriented media literacy centers marginalized voices and perspectives that are too often left out.

Disciplinary Content

Finally, teachers' justice-oriented media literacy puts in conversation imaginative visions of learning with the realities of the location of teachers' work. The work of critical literacy in teaching and teacher education is mediated by interrelated and socially constructed *sites of struggle* such as control, bureaucracy, and isolation (Stewart et al., 2021). In response, a justice-oriented approach to media literacy must address teachers' self-efficacy and creative agency as they work within and beyond the constraints of their own settings, which in school-based contexts include content standards such as the Common Core.

Janie's lessons, for instance, reflected a creative response to this tension. She aligned Common Core State Standards regarding reading and writing informational texts, as well as International Society of Technology in Education standards regarding digital citizenship and knowledge construction, with students' critical analysis and authorship of media. Students were asked to read other youth's journalistic writing and put that in conversation with historical texts about social change and the responsibilities of media. From Janie's perspective, these new arrangements of content offered a way for her to "reimagine" how close reading could be applied "in a slightly different way," specifically to visual texts. She had her students not only engage the disciplinary practice of close reading but do so in a mode and with content that was relevant to them. In this way, Janie deftly synthesized her humanizing expertise about teaching with official curricular requirements. Such work represents improvisation and the ability to work both within and beyond constraints by bringing humanizing critical sociocultural knowledge to bear in the classroom (Brown, 2013). Justice-oriented media literacy uplifts teachers' improvisation, particularly its ability to "powerfully inform teachers' understandings of and actions toward justice" (Philip et al., 2019).

Conclusion

Educators are morally obligated to lead learning communities toward just social futures that enact humanization and equity over exclusion and oppression. Justice-oriented media literacy is a promising approach to supporting teachers and students to critically read the world around them and to share those readings, or commentaries, as valuable instances of meaning-making. Within our proposed model of justice-oriented media literacy, authorship remains a guiding principle that directly influences how the other four design commitments—including commentary and annotation, text pairings, digital technology, and (disciplinary) content—are operationalized. Centering authorship offers widened apertures for capturing the knowledge and expertise stemming from diverse perspectives, while practices of commentary and annotation help make knowledge visible. As situated in schools, our approach to justice-oriented media literacy seeks to acknowledge educators' institutional contexts and constraints by addressing codified learning and technology standards while also designing beyond them.

We suggest that justice-oriented media literacy centers marginalized voices and perspectives that are too often left out. Returning to Janie, she shared how she rarely experienced opportunities like YMBTM that "absolutely honored her time" and presented "possibility for play, for thinking about things, for this excitement around building curriculum." During the summer and beyond, Janie maintained conversation with other teachers, brainstorming curriculum ideas, sharing those via collaborative artifacts, and giving and receiving feedback as she iterated her learning designs. In this way, teachers' expertise was invited and taken up in a chosen and experimental community of learners driven by their own pedagogical priorities as situated in their local contexts of teaching. This community demonstrates a move away from contrived collegiality toward

space for discourses of collegiality (Smith et al., 2021) to flourish and/or emerge. Our approach to justice-oriented media literacy simultaneously amplifies the voices of teachers in contrast to dominant frames of professional development and centers the interests of students as a rejoinder to deficit frames of their learning. Justice-oriented media literacy is relevant to the lives and literacies of both teachers and students and can broaden participation in socially consequential literacy education.

Our approach to justice-oriented media literacy simultaneously amplifies the voices of teachers in contrast to dominant frames of professional development and centers the interests of students as a rejoinder to deficit frames of their learning. Justice-oriented media literacy is relevant to the lives and literacies of both teachers and students and can broaden participation in socially consequential literacy education.

References

Brown, K. D. (2013). Trouble on my mind: Toward a framework of humanizing critical sociocultural knowledge for teaching and teacher education. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, *16*(3), 316–38.

Chávez, V., & Soep, E. (2005). Youth radio and the pedagogy of collegiality. *Harvard Educational Review*, *75*(4), 409.

Frazier, K. (2021, Feb. 23). Chicago's summer 2020 through the eyes of a young photographer. *YR Media*. https://yr.media/arts-culture/vashon-jordan-chicago-protests-george-floyd-kierra-frazier/

Freire, P. (1983). The importance of the act of reading. *Journal of Education*, *165*(1), 5–11.

Gutiérrez, K. D., Cortes, K., Cortez, A., DiGiacomo, D., Higgs, J., Johnson, P., Lizárraga, J.R., Mendoza, E., Tien, J., & Vakil, S. (2017). Replacing representation with imagination: Finding ingenuity in everyday practices. *Review of Research in Education*, *41*(1), 30–60.

Jocson, K. M. (2018). *Youth media matters: Participatory cultures and literacies in education*. University of Minnesota Press.

Kalir, R., & Garcia, A. (2021). *Annotation*. MIT Press.

Kalir, J., Cantrill, C., Dean, J., & Dillon, J. (2020). Iterating the Marginal Syllabus: Social reading and annotation while social distancing. *Journal of Technology and Teacher Education*, 28(2), 463–71.

Kalir, R., Cantrill, C., Dillon, J., McBride, C., & King, M. (2021). The Marginal Syllabus Project. In *Society for Information Technology & Teacher Education International Conference* (pp. 1069–75). Association for the Advancement of Computing in Education (AACE).

Lee, C., & Soep, E. (2016). None but ourselves can free our minds: Critical computational literacy as a pedagogy of resistance. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, *49*(4), 480–92.

Lyiscott, J., Mirra, N., & Garcia, A. (2021). *Critical media literacy and popular culture in ELA classrooms*. National Council of Teachers of English. https://ncte.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/SquireOfficePolicyBrief_CriticalMediaLiteracy_April2021.pdf

Mirra, N., Morrell, E., & Filipiak, D. (2018). From digital consumption to digital invention: Toward a new critical theory and practice of multiliteracies. *Theory into Practice*, *57*(1), 12–19.

National Council of Teachers of English. (2021). *Report of the task force on critical media Literacy*. https://www.canva.com/design/DAERz0BpJyk/I4sPUxfrZlHLVys3QIVilQ/view?utm_content=DAERz0BpJyk&utm_campaign=designshare&utm_medium=link&utm_source=homepage_design_menu#4

Philip, T. M., Souto-Manning, M., Anderson, L., Horn, I., J. Carter Andrews, D., Stillman, J., & Varghese, M. (2019). Making justice peripheral by constructing practice as "core": How the increasing prominence of core practices challenges teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, *70*(3), 251–64.

Robinson, S. (2021, July 14). Young Black journalists envision a media revolution. *YR Media*. https://yr.media/identity/young-black-journalists-envision-a-media-revolution/

Skerrett, A., Warrington, A., & Williamson, T. (2018). Generative principles for professional learning for equity-oriented urban English teachers. *English Education*, 50(2), 116–46.

Smith, A., McBride, C., & Rogers, C. (2021). Exploring the edges of collegiality: a cross-case analysis toward humanizing teachers' connected learning. *Pedagogies: An International Journal*, *16*(2), 200–17.

Stewart, O., Hsieh, B., Smith, A., & Pandya, J. Z. (2021). What more can we do? A scalar approach to examining critical digital literacies in teacher education. *Pedagogies: An International Journal*, *16*(2), 125–37.

The Editorial Board. (1944, July 8). Credo for the negro press. *New Journal and Guide*, C8.

Trimbur, J. (1990). Essayist literacy and the rhetoric of deproduction. *Rhetoric Review*, *9*(1), 72–86.