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Forum

Framing borders and belonging in the digital space: Reflections for and from the Comparative and International Education Field

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Introduction

At the 2025 Comparative and International Education Conference (CIES), the three authors of this paper engaged in one of four plenary sessions that were designed to provoke new thinking in a dialogic and interactive manner. Under the theme of *Provocations*, the four plenary sessions planned for the 2025 Conference were meant to generate dialogue on pivotal topics and issues in comparative education.

This model drew upon a similar design through the inaugural *Provocations* sessions launched at the CIES 2022 conference in Minneapolis.

In this paper, we describe and reflect on our conversation that mobilized the notion of *borderlands* (Anzaldúa, 1987) to look at the manifestation of digital educational spaces as hybrid, fluid, and complex fusions of the old and new, material and discursive, and human and non-human spaces. Developed by Gloria Anzaldúa, the concept of borderlands refers to materiality of borders, such as national borders, as well as to invisible borders such as internal and social borders of identities, cultures, languages, and knowledges. It highlights the hybridity, the in-betweenness, ambiguities, and contradictions associated with not fully belonging to a particular category such as nation, gender, race, or other categories. This (un)belonging, however, is not seen as a lack, but an ability to crossover and being able to transform and being transformed (Keating, 2006).

As presenters in this session, we entered this space as three scholars with different expertise and life experiences to engage with how this in-betweenness becomes a productive lens to approach the dominant perceptions of technology as an embodiment of human progress and development (Buckingham, 2007; Feenberg, 1991; 1995; 1999; Nye, 1994; 2006; Postman, 1992). The constant 'newness', the repetitive nature of technological overhaul, and the cycle of obsolescence within digital spaces together creates a synergy with the notions of how traditional identity markers such as nation, race, and gender among others can transcend digital spaces. This in turn fosters a belief that digital spaces can enhance *global* community and communication that can go beyond the local boundedness (Bauman, 1998; Shields, 2013; Thomas & Wang, 2013). Yet, we argue that these digital spaces, while sometimes facilitating expressions of new modes of thinking and identities, also continue to reproduce the so-called *old*. For example, these digital spaces have become hot beds for militant nationalism, hate speech, and misinformation that have at times triggered new and other times fueled old conflicts. The response to such ambiguity and ambivalence that surrounds digital spaces is often a frantic search for new and stricter forms of regulations – or reiterates the ways in which "dominant paradigms (and) predefined concepts…exist as unquestionable (and) unchallengable" (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 16). Thus, we see these digital spaces as borderlands that are constantly under surveillance and yet serve as spaces for new possibilities, new journeys, and new homes. As states, corporations, and dominant groups use digital technologies to maintain the status quo, the same technologies have also played a role in democratizing different domains. For example, citizen journalists connecting the world to the spaces and issues that might have become inaccessible to mainstream journalists. Thus, the story of digital

technologies and digital spaces is not merely of progress and global connections but also of fragmentation, divide, and surveillance. Whereas these aspects are by no means unique to these digital domains, we do argue that the co-existence of these conflicting influences, that are shaping and are being by digital technologies and spaces, shapes our lives in ways we are still learning to perceive, while we also struggle with moral, ethical and human considerations in these borderland spaces.

In this context, we employ the framing of borderlands to engage not only with the nature, workings, and value of these digital educational spaces but also to reflect on some of the questions that have been central to the field of comparative and international education (CIE). For example, the CIE scholarship continues to critically engage with the neoliberal framings of schooling as an uncontested site of empowerment for all (Monkman 2011; Stromquist & Fischman, 2009; Unterhalter, 2023). We argue that such linear models of education as empowerment have also shaped the dominant framings of digital technology as the path to improving access to and quality of education. These paradigms about digital educational spaces generate questions that are primarily about facilitating teachers and students to learn to fully receive from these technological enhancements (Buckingham, 2007; Cuban, 1986; 2001; Fishman, 2014; Stoll, 1995). What remains unintelligible in these paradigms are any critical engagements with the nature of these digital technologies, their intersections with the existing educational hierarchies, and their potential impact on any shifts in the modalities of the teaching and learning processes.

We also explore the possibilities and limitations of approaching and exploring these digital educational spaces as “spaces” and not merely as new contexts for teaching and learning for different actors. In this environment, we engage with Indigenous scholarship (Brayboy et al., 2012; Cajete, 2000; Smith, 2012; Tuck et al., 2014) and critical geography scholarship (Massey, 2005; Soja, 2010) that approach places and spaces as having material as well as relational, interactive, social, and spiritual dimensions (Bang 2020; Kimmerer, 2013; Wilson 2020). These approaches offer human and more-than-human environments as being intertwined and interactional systems that shape and are being shaped by each other. They facilitate examining activities, shifts, and transformations in any context as not always being human-led and human-centered. We also consider the work of Andrew Feenberg and the notion of working towards a critical theory of technology that may inform our sensibilities for the design, implementation, and evaluation of technology-rich innovations that may work to remake cultures and societies.

Theoretical Perspectives on Technology

Feenberg (1991) distinguishes between *instrumental* and *substantive* theories of technology to clarify how technological systems relate to society. In the instrumental view, technology is understood as a neutral tool, devoid of inherent values, whose social impact depends entirely on how humans choose to use it. In an instrumental view of technology, "Technology is deemed 'neutral,' without valuative content of its own" (Feenberg, 1991, p. 5). By contrast, the substantive view holds that technology is not neutral but possesses a built-in logic that systematically shapes social life toward efficiency, control, and standardization. Feenberg argues that while the instrumental theory overlooks the political and value-laden nature of technological design, the substantive theory overstates technological determinism. His work seeks a middle ground by showing that technology is socially shaped yet open to democratic transformation. Feenberg (1991) states:

> If technology is truly neutral, it should be able to serve a plurality of ends. But the close association of mass democracy with cultural Westernization seems to deny that pluralism, and in fact confirms the arguments of substantive theory (p. 12).

Another philosopher of technology, David Nye, emphasized the importance of context in understanding the reciprocal nature of our relationship with technology. Nye explains that, "A tool always implies at least one small story. There is a situation; something needs doing. Someone obtains or invents a tool in order to do it" (Nye, 2006, p. 5). Also relevant here is Nye's notion of the *technological sublime*. The notion of the technological sublime describes the powerful emotional and cultural response people experience when encountering monumental technologies such as railroads, skyscrapers, dams, or space travel that evoke awe, wonder, and a sense of national greatness. Nye argues that these technologies are not only practical achievements but also symbolic artifacts that help construct national identity, celebrate progress, and legitimize social or political power. The technological sublime thus transforms technology into a cultural narrative of inevitability and optimism, masking its social costs by framing large-scale technological systems as both spectacular and morally uplifting (Nye, 1994; 2006). This feeds a perpetual sense of optimism about technology and the sense that there is no problem that cannot be addressed through the application of technology. This, in turn, shrouds any pitfalls that may be inscribed into new tools and their application.

The philosopher Martin Heidegger (1977) also argues that modern technology is not just a set of tools but a way of revealing the world. He calls this modern mode of revealing *Enframing* (Gestell), which orders nature and even humans as a 'standing reserve' of resources to be optimized and controlled. This

technological mindset narrows our relationship to the world by reducing everything to utility and efficiency. Although Heidegger sees this as a profound danger, he also believes that recognizing Enframing can open the possibility for more reflective and poetic ways of relating to being. He states:

> Everywhere we remain unfree and chained to technology, whether we passionately affirm or deny it. But we are delivered over to it in the worst possible way when we regard it as something neutral; for this conception of it, to which today we particularly like to do homage, makes us utterly blind to the essence of technology (Heidegger, 1977, p. 4).

For Feenberg, Nye, and Heidegger technology cannot be thought of simply as a set of tools and an individual tool is not simply an object to be wielded by an agentive being. The tool itself has agency that has been designed into it. In this way a piece of technology may be thought of like Frodo's Ring of Power from the Lord of the Rings (Jackson et al., 2001; Tolkien, 1954). The ring had agency. It had desire. It had a will to fulfill its intended purpose. A common refrain in the gun debate in America is that 'guns don't kill people, people kill people'. The implication is that restricting gun accessibility fails to target the agentive being behind gun violence. This instrumental philosophy of technology we argue should be resisted in favor of a substantive view of technology like that of Feenberg, Nye, Heidegger, and others. The ring, the gun, or any tool or piece of technology has inscribed in its essence agency, a purpose, a will, and a cultural context.

Technology itself we see as a cultural, social, and ontological force that shapes how people understand and inhabit the world. Heidegger argues that modern technology imposes a dominant mode of structuring up or 'enframing' that reduces the world to resources and risks narrowing human existence while locking us into a hostile relationship with our environment. David Nye complements this by showing how technology operates not only as a system of control but also as a cultural spectacle, generating the 'technological sublime' that inspires awe, national pride, and narratives of perceived 'progress'. In this sense, technology gains emotional and ideological power, making Heidegger's (1977) *Enframing* feel not only natural but desirable. Andrew Feenberg (1991) extends the analysis in a more political and practical direction: while acknowledging that technology embodies social values and power relations, he rejects the determinism implied by Heidegger's and some substantive theories. For Feenberg, technologies can be democratically shaped and redesigned, allowing societies to contest and transform the values built into technological systems. Taken together, these thinkers show that technology structures human experience (Heidegger, 1977), mobilizes cultural meaning (Nye, 1994; 2006), and embeds political choices that remain open to intervention (Dusek, 2006; Feenberg 1991; 1995; 1999; Oppenheimer, 2004). Contemporary society seems to have arrived at a single manifestation

of modernity. This is a conception of technology that is characterized by technological advancement (Feenberg, 1995). Might there have been the emergence of a different non-western expression of technological advancement? Did it have to be European? Calling our basic conceptions of technology and their association with 'western civilization' is part of what must be questioned with a *critical* theory of technology (Feenberg, 1999). Are we inevitably snared by the burgeoning ubiquity and the amplifying capacity of technology or can we harness its potential for the emancipatory flourishing for all within its reach?

Frameworks in Conversation

These frameworks can enable educational scholars to pay close attention to the design and workings of diverse digital educational spaces not merely as background for teaching and learning activities of humans but to explore processes that might not always be led and controlled by humans. Under these perspectives, seeing humans as the sole proprietor or as passive recipients of these digital technologies is severely limiting. Instead, they help us recognize humans as well as these digital spaces as diverse actors that shape contextual, relational, and hybrid teaching and learning processes.

Written as dialogue, the questions and answers below reflect our own grappling with these ideas. Our collective engagement with these ideas and conversation with each other offered a chance to not only share our own uncertainties and understandings, but allowed us to push each other in real time, to rethink, reflect and re-engage our own ways of thinking. The dialogue is centered around the forms of power, in terms of logic as well as materiality, to see who/what becomes visible and what is deemed incomprehensive and unintelligible in these tech-enhanced spaces. Taking our conversation at the CIES 2025 conference and crafting it into this Forum article reflects our ideas, uncertainties and our aspirations for future discussion, that emerged through a series of prompts and questions.

In addition, our dialogic engagement as well as this reflective writing are organized around three interconnected arguments. First, how digital spaces can simultaneously be empowering and restrictive and inclusive and exclusive. This helps us move away from seeing these spaces as either good or bad and recognize the hybridity embedded in their existence and workings. Second, juxtaposition of the institutional modes of regulating these digital educational spaces with how these spaces can serve to diffuse and democratize power. Digital spaces that often have surveillance embedded in some cases have also facilitated actors from the margins to claim power within the system. Third, how digital

educational spaces within educational institutions can facilitate transcending the material and cultural borders of these institutions by connecting to communities that have been excluded from these institutional spaces.

Following is a re-creation of the dialogue between the three authors drawn from our dialogue, staged as a conversation between friends at a Moroccan tea shop.

Question 1 - If and how do you think the "digital" nature of the spaces that we are a part of normalizes and privileges certain forms of knowing? In other words, how do you think the "design" of these technologies are shaping our experience?

Khurshid – In contemporary times, digital spaces like social media have played a significant role in reproducing certain forms of privilege. For example, they have amplified certain voices, such as corporations, that were already dominant. However, there are also *new* voices that are emerging from the very same social media spaces. The voices and experiences that we might have never heard before. For example, just the other day, I heard a fascinating conversation about how social media spaces and the related role of influencers have made the super model phenomenon a relic of the past. That exclusive space reserved for very few has been democratized as marketing for products has become a domain of the influencers. However, this does not imply that the racialized, gendered, and other hierarchies of the fashion or marketing world have gone away. Instead, they are being reworked with still a focus on maximizing profit. Moving away from the binary and recognizing the newness and oldness of these digital spaces can help us go deeper into a critical exploration of the nature and workings of these digital spaces. There is a lot of new there with a lot of old and some fusion of the old/new and so much more.

Moving to the second part of the question about the design of these technologies, there is no doubt that design of any framing, whether it is research, classroom, or a digital space, shapes certain ways of knowing and what becomes intelligible or not. The current political climate in the US and many other places provides ample evidence for echo chambers that have been created around certain ways of thinking. However, I wonder how we might be able to approach the complexity of these ways of knowing. As has been shown in the critical CIE scholarship, a number of international development/education programs driven by neoliberal discourses/agendas have generated spaces/processes that are simultaneously inclusive and exclusive in different ways. For example, my research with women teachers in rural communities of Pakistan showed that their access to higher

education enabled them to access economic resources, public mobility, and participation in family and community level decision making. However, it also made their lives extremely hectic and stressful as their domestic responsibilities remained the same as other women while they also worked as teachers and participated in a number of family and community level processes. In other words, their access to labor market participation that was made possible through an international development organization offered new opportunities while sustaining some gendered hierarchies for these women teachers who were the first ones in their communities to have received higher education.

How can we approach digital spaces in the same vein, i.e., be attentive to their hybridity and complexity? For example, whereas these digital spaces do normalize certain discourses, does that happen through erasing any spaces for difference? Or do these spaces remain contested and both constraining but also facilitating shifts in the status quo.

Baily – In the digital space, there is an expectation of anonymity that is supposedly granted to those who reside in those areas, whether they are individuals, corporations, loose assemblages of groups, or other entities that make the digital space their own. There is an assumption that the digital space allows for one's true self to emerge. While that might be true, the question of how our true self manifests itself in these spaces is oftentimes questionable. Does it bring out our best or our worst? And how does the presence of a majority then normalize and privilege certain forms of knowing even if the knowledge itself is uncertain and dubious? Debates over the validity of science and faith have taken precarious turns over the past three decades, but the debates in digital venues can often result in faulty knowledge in part due to the echo chambers that Ayesha discusses in her section. The possibility of remaining in a bubble of similar ideas is often seen as a negative, in that seeking a plurality and diversity of views is increasingly seen as finding common ground, but how does this then give justification and legitimacy to ideas that are truly abhorrent?

As such, the design of such spaces offers a convergence to allow one to exist between being seen and being part of a group; where you can be both an individual while also feeling like you are part of a cluster and find value and appreciation for your ideas and your presence in terms of numbers. The design of such spaces, often under the auspices of 'free speech' allows technology to create blinders for us and we are validated, justified and find community in those spaces. When people agree with us on our worldview, we feel vindicated and when they do not, we can revert to our 'communities' to nurse our wounds.

This engagement and disengagement as well as this need for in-group allegiances for individuals, can occur across ideological neutrality, but it is also important to remind readers that there is no ideological neutrality. While controllers of these spaces (whether it is Elon Must, Mark Zuckerberg, or Jeff Bezos), might argue that their platforms are not ideologically driven, but that the market creates the demand for certain thematic spaces, as consumers, we are frequently unsure of how to navigate the digital landscape. As such, it seems to me that those who feel they have more to lose, feel more isolated, depend on these spaces to find their community and feel connected to their tribes.

The ability to find *borderlands* is both the goal and the outcome and the spaces becomes zones of safety and privilege, but if we see *borderlands* as something to desire, our engagement with the other becomes a strength, since we are engaging with the other as a way to learn about our place in the grey rather than resort to comfort in the extremes.

Thomas: The development of a critical, or at least a questioning, theory of technology compels us to examine both the emancipatory possibilities and the embedded risks of new, ubiquitous technologies. However, these same technologies often reproduce the very hierarchies they claim to dismantle. The myth of neutrality in AI and algorithmic decision-making reinforces dominant ideologies, privileging Western paradigms of assessment and intelligence. The rise of learning analytics and data-driven education also raises concerns about surveillance, data colonialism, and the commodification of learning. Rather than fostering intellectual transformation, technology often accelerates the neoliberal marketization of education, reducing knowledge to a transaction rather than a process of critical engagement. As an instructional designer, I'm influenced by the work of Andrew Feenberg whose critical theory of technology provides a useful framework for understanding these tensions. Feenberg argues that technology is not an autonomous force but a socially constructed system that can be shaped by human values and political struggles. From this perspective, educational institutions must actively intervene in the **design** and use of technology, resisting deterministic narratives that position technology as an inevitable driver of progress.

Question 2 - How do you think states/institutions/corporations manipulate these digital spaces to target certain ways of thinking, knowing, and being? What impact, if any, do you think these strategies might have had on CIE as a field or on your work as a CIE researcher, practitioner, and/or policymaker?

Baily: The immediate answer to this question seems to be "But of course, there is manipulation by a variety of actors and that those manipulations have a direct impact on our work in the field of CIE."

While that might be the answer, that also feels naive in part due the fact that the idea of manipulation is dependent on ideological allegiances which exist as part of how power and hegemony manifest themselves in our world. In creating striated, hierarchical systems, the presence of any tool will lead to actors engaging in actions that aim to direct those certain ways of thinking, being and knowing. The impact this has had on how I consider the work of CIE, is connected to how the goals of education itself is changing, and in many ways, being embraced by people within our field itself, that creates a dangerous environment moving forward. To make this a tangible idea, let's consider the role of 'critical thinking' in schools. We have given a great deal of lip-service to this issue over the past thirty years, yet, if we stopped considering it, there is very limited demand for people to be independent and revolutionary thinkers. We prefer to seek out conformity and compliance (Baily, 2023) as outcomes for our learners and the neoliberal model of education has become par for the course, where we design education to ensure that the customer, who is either the parent or the student, sees an immediate value for the investment they are making in their education. In CIE, we have tended to move towards benchmarks, metrics, conformity for curriculum and assessments, and seek out growth that mimics the neoliberal markets. This bodes well for how we seek out a single way of thinking which then allows states/institutions/corporations to ensure that digital spaces are manipulated to offer a single way of thinking/being/knowing.

Khurshid: Looking at the impact in the current political climate and the crackdown on higher education institutions and research traditions is destabilizing in so many ways. There is certainly state/corporation level regulation and disciplining and yet such diffusion of power when it comes to digital spaces. For example, it is this very access to these digital spaces enabled me to work with an Indigenous Maya Muslim community in Mexico. Our research team was able to gain access to this community in 2021 using WhatsApp. Since then, we have visited this community multiple times. But between these visits, it is through these digital technologies that we have connected and deepened our connections. Given the ever-shrinking funds for higher education and especially for international research in the US, these digital technologies have helped me to connect with communities that are critical to my research. Given the relational nature of my scholarship, this work would not have been feasible without this digital access.

Thomas: I realize this is challenging. I also see myself as a guest in this CIE space. I think that to meaningfully engage with technological advancements, institutions must cultivate critical digital literacy and interrogate the ethical, cultural, and political implications of educational technologies. This requires

resisting the unchecked adoption of digital tools and instead fostering inclusive, justice-oriented, and community-driven approaches to design. By embracing pluralism, critical reflexivity, and techno-skepticism, formal education can move beyond passive adoption and become an active co-creator of ethical and culturally responsive learning futures.

Khurshid: This question also reminds us to reflect on the nature and purpose of connectivity. Is connectivity always good? And who benefits from it? And when and how does it become a tool of surveillance?

Question 3 - How do you think formal institutions of education can critically engage with the opportunities and challenges offered by these technological advancements?

Thomas: I see it as my work as an administrator in higher education and as an academic to critically interrogate the assumptions embedded in technological advancements rather than accept them as neutral tools. Digital platforms, AI, and online learning environments are not merely innovations. They are cultural artifacts shaped by power, ideology, and historical contextualities. On one hand, technology offers us opportunities for interrogating, decentering, and reimagining traditional knowledge systems. It affords our ability to disrupt Eurocentric, colonial narratives that structure our society. Open-access resources, AI-powered translation tools, and decentralized learning networks create space for epistemic pluralism, amplifying indigenous and non-Western ways of knowing. Additionally, digital and hybrid learning environments blur rigid institutional structures, making room for more participatory, co-constructed knowledge practices. I think we can all see that given current events; this is as important as ever. Especially as technological tools are becoming exponentially more powerful.

On the other hand, technology comes with elements that may be inherently interwoven into the very fabric of their being. This is a thorny dilemma that we must not avoid but rather lean into and explore with ever more assiduous scrutiny.

Khurshid: When we look at formal institutions of education, we must approach them as powerful, regulating and yet non-homogenous entities. For example, higher education institutions have policies regarding the use of technologies and digital spaces, etc. However, they do not determine how these technologies are used. The availability of these institutional resources can facilitate and enable individuals and groups to be creative and connect in ways that go beyond institutional boundaries. As mentioned earlier, my own research is an example of how digital technologies can facilitate research.

However, it is of course not possible to overlook how the institutional surveillance of these spaces is quite extensive and yet not always very effective. For example, educational institutions are struggling to develop policies and systems to regulate the use of artificial intelligence for academic work. I wonder if it might be more meaningful to engage with the questions of authorship and ethics and not just developing stricter surveillance system.

Baily: Thinking about the wide range of educational institutions that we cover in CIE, across multiple contexts, with a range of resources, and varying degrees of exposure, I think that we cannot seek out a one-size fits all approach, but I also think that we have to remember that the tools themselves, while might not do anything themselves, the actors who engage with them have clear agendas, interests, and power over and within to manipulate groups and individuals that they seek to influence. Our conversation has raised for me, this idea of tools-within-tools where older tools, such as maybe films, or audio recordings, or even textbooks, are not enmeshed within the digital space, meaning that the borderlands we are engaging with are across multiple dimensions. Institutions and spaces of education would be strengthened if there was more awareness of the motivations of why, and how, and to what end, we were using them, particularly for the tool-within-tool concept. Nothing is truly neutral, the question becomes how we ensure that the values in these ideological hierarchies are not weaponized to support the basest of our instincts, which is where power and privilege seem to be coalescing in this current climate.

Closing Thoughts

Our brief discussion here, and our thoughts related to our framing of the *borderlands* as a way of thinking of belonging in the digital spaces, is but a provocative lens through which we hope to spur further critical engagement with these ideas. Our own ideological leanings define how we look at this topic, but we would argue that the current climate of fear, isolation, and anger at others has been strengthened, in part, due to the anonymity, weaponization and freedom from the scrutinizing eyes of the neighbor, friend, teacher, partner, family-member, have been negated. The notion of technological sublime should not divert our attention from the fact that, with that awe, we might in fact, give up our agency, that in turn protects us from isolation and the unwillingness to see the borders as places of belonging.

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