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Online dialogical cycles and digital culture: Complexity in pre-service and in-service teacher education

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Abstract

This study examines how pre-service and in-service teacher educators from different cultural contexts construct meanings of digital cultures and their implications for teacher education and educational practices. The research was conducted through online dialogical cycles involving 28 participants from universities in Brazil, Canada, England, and South Africa. Grounded in a qualitative and post-critical framework, the study draws on Freirean dialogue, complexity theory, and action research principles. Data were generated through oral and written dialogical cycles held over four months and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal both convergences and tensions in participants' perspectives, particularly regarding diversity of knowledge and collaboration, pedagogical sensitivity and affect, humanization and inclusion in digital contexts, and critical engagement with discourses of innovation. The results indicate that digital cultures cannot be approached from a purely instrumental perspective, but require critical, relational, and dialogical forms of engagement. The study contributes to the field of digital teacher education by conceptualizing online dialogical cycles as collaborative spaces that challenge instrumental approaches to technology and inform more critical, relational, and dialogic teacher education practices.

Keywords

Digital culture; teacher education; online dialogic cycles; complexity; post-critical perspectives



1 Opening moves

This study examines how pre-service and in-service teacher educators from different cultural contexts construct meanings about digital cultures and their implications for teacher education and educational practices.

It is a training-research project inspired by action-research approaches (Barbier, 2002), Freirean dialogues (Freire, 1987, 1993, 1996), Morin's complexity theory (2000, 2011), and Josso's (2004) concept of research-training.

It is a qualitative study which is justified by the need to understand how pre-service and in-service teacher educators perceive, create, and re-signify digital cultures within higher education, and how they affect and are affected by these cultures in relation to their educational practices.

We begin the article by presenting the post-critical methodological perspective and the digital cycles. We then discuss digital culture and teacher education in a complex world. Finally, we explore the meanings woven through the narrative dialogues that emerged from the cycles and some concluding considerations.

2 Movement of the waters: the post-critical perspective and the digital cycles

This qualitative study adopts a post-critical methodological framework (Meyer & Paraíso, 2012), which transcends the rigidity often associated with fixed research design by embracing openness, reflexivity, and the creative processes involved in knowledge production. Within this perspective, research is not understood as the application of predetermined procedures, but as a dynamic and situated process in which researchers position themselves as interpretive subjects and construct meanings in relation to the phenomena investigated.

Post-critical research challenges the idea of neutral and universal knowledge by recognizing that research practices are historically, culturally, and politically situated. Within this perspective, methodology is not conceived as a rigid sequence of predefined steps, but as flexible and evolving process shaped by the research context, participants' experiences, and emerging questions.

Paraphrasing Meyer and Paraíso (2012), we adopt the metaphor of the boat navigating moving waters. According to the authors, this metaphor shows some important aspects of post-critical inquiry: there is no single or predetermined destination, and the research journey involves continuous decisions about directions, paths, and interpretations. Researchers may embark on or leave certain routes as the investigation unfolds, incorporating elements that become meaningful to the study while leaving aside others that no longer contribute to the research process.

Engaging in research from this perspective therefore implies embracing uncertainty, risk, and the transformative potential of inquiry. The research process resembles a journey across the ocean in which immersion, movement, and reflection occur simultaneously. As researchers navigate these waters, they are invited to question established certainties, recognize the provisional nature of knowledge, and remain open to unexpected insights that may emerge from encounters with participants and with the empirical material.

In this study, the post-critical perspective supports the development of dialogical spaces in which participants are invited to share and reflect upon their experiences with digital cultures and teacher education. The dialogical cycles created opportunities for participants to narrate their practices, question assumptions, and collectively construct meanings about educational processes in digitally mediated contexts. Rather than seeking definitive conclusions, the analysis focused

on the interpretations and tensions that emerged from these narrative exchanges, recognizing them as part of the complex and ongoing process of meaning-making in educational research.

Within this post-critical framework, narrative processes assume an important role in the production of knowledge. Narrating experiences allows participants to revisit their trajectories, reflect upon their practices, and attribute meanings to events situated in everyday educational contexts. For Almeida and Valente (2012), narrating experience means documenting memories of daily social life, capturing individual particularities, the collective dimension of a group, and the meanings that people attribute to lived situations.

This perspective connects with the formative dimension of narrative emphasized by Josso (2004), who argues that experiences narrated and reflected upon can become formative when they articulate knowledge, practices, values, and meanings. According to the author, formative experience emerges when individuals become aware of their trajectories and engage reflexively with their own stories, mobilizing different registers of knowledge and experience in a process of self-understanding and professional development.

In this study, narrative dialogues developed during the online dialogical cycles were understood as spaces in which participants could share their professional experiences, question assumptions, and collectively construct interpretations about digital cultures and educational practices. These dialogical exchanges enabled the emergence of meanings grounded in lived experiences and in the interactions established among participants from different cultural contexts.

The dynamics of the dialogical cycles were also inspired by principles of action research. According to Barbier (2002), action research develops through a spiral-like process in which action and reflection are continuously intertwined, generating recursive movements between practice and critical analysis. In this sense, the dialogical cycles were organized as collaborative spaces in which themes, reflections, and discussions were negotiated among participants, allowing the research process to remain open, flexible, and responsive to emerging issues.

Thus, the articulation between post-critical inquiry, narrative approaches, and action research supported the development of a research process grounded in dialogue, reflexivity, and collaborative meaning-making. Rather than seeking linear explanations, the study privileged the interpretations and tensions that emerged from the narratives shared during the cycles, recognizing them as expressions of the complex relationships between digital cultures, teacher education, and educational practices.

3 Online dialogical cycles: Research procedures and data analysis

The empirical phase of this study was developed through a series of online dialogical cycles involving 28 participants, including pre-service and in-service teacher educators from public and private universities in Brazil, Canada, England, and South Africa. The participants voluntarily joined the study following an open invitation circulated among partner institutions, inviting them to share their experiences and reflections about digital cultures and teacher education.

Seven dialogical cycles were conducted over a period of approximately four months, with meetings taking place every two weeks. Each cycle lasted between 90 and 120 minutes and was carried out through digital platforms such as Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, or Zoom, depending on participants' availability. The meetings were organized collaboratively, and the themes discussed emerged both from participants' interests and from provocations related to previous studies and theoretical references brought by the research team. Each cycle followed a flexible structure including an opening prompt, collective discussion, and reflective synthesis.

Given the transnational nature of the study, linguistic diversity was an important dimension of the dialogical cycles. Participants were free to express themselves in Portuguese or English, and interactions frequently involved processes of translation and negotiation of meanings. Rather than treating language differences as barriers, the study approached them as part of the dialogical and intercultural process, allowing participants to co-construct understandings across linguistic and cultural contexts. This dynamic also informed the analytical process, in which attention was given to how meanings were expressed, translated, and interpreted within the group.

Data were generated through oral and written narrative dialogues produced during these meetings. The sessions were recorded with participants' consent, and field notes were taken to document contextual elements of the interactions. These materials constituted the corpus of the study.

We employed thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) which allows for flexibility in interpreting patterns of meaning across the dataset. It manifests in attentive listening among interlocutors, and in the absence of predefined patterns. Rather than representing a simple transcription of reality, it is an active and time-consuming process of sculpting pieces of narrative evidence. This implied a constant back-and-forth between the data produced, the theoretical framework, and the research objectives. And it is in this time of reflection that we produce connections between the different elements, identifying emerging themes, assigning meaning to them, and constructing answers to the research questions.

We went through the process of familiarizing ourselves with the data, transcribing and revisiting them, reading and rereading them, noting initial ideas during the process. Next, we coded in an inductive yet post-critical manner, allowing themes to emerge from the data, while remaining informed by the study's theoretical framework. We grouped the codes into potential themes and combined all the data pertinent to each one. Finally, we analyzed whether the themes worked in relation to the extracts and refined the details, generating definitions for each theme, providing extracts chosen in relation to the research objectives, the dialogue with the participants, and the theoretical framework of the research. To enhance analytical rigor, themes were discussed among the research team and iteratively refined. In addition, selected interpretations were shared with participants for feedback, ensuring alignment with their perspectives.

This study followed established ethical guidelines for research involving human participants (Certificate of Presentation for Ethical Review – CAAE – Brazil 83333118.9.1001.5162). All participants were informed about the objectives of the study and voluntarily agreed to take part in the research. Informed consent was obtained prior to data generation, including permission for recording the online dialogical cycles. Participants' identities were protected through anonymization, and all data were handled confidentially. The research process respected participants' autonomy, voices, and right to withdraw at any stage of the study.

4 Digital culture and teacher education: Dialogues in a complex world

Digital cultures are those that emerge daily intertwined with digital technologies. According to Paniago and Moura (2024), digital cultures refer to the multiple modes of expression, interaction, and organization of daily life—such as speaking, writing, working, studying, producing, and relating—that are shaped by the presence and use of information and communication technologies.

From this perspective, we draw on Larrosa's (1996) idea of experience to affirm that digital cultures are not simply events that pass without leaving a mark. Experience refers to what affects and transforms us: when knowledge does not provoke shifts in the learner, it establishes only a

superficial contact with knowledge, which does not translate into the formation or transformation of the subject (Bondía, 1996).

Reflecting on digital cultures also implies problematizing teacher education. From this perspective, training is not limited to scientific, pedagogical, or didactic updating, but involves the creation of spaces for participation, reflection, and collective construction of knowledge (Imbernón, 2004). This perspective aligns with formative processes constituted in collaborative networks, in which learning occurs in a shared way, because, as Freire (1993) points out, no one educates anyone alone; subjects educate each other mutually, in communion and mediated by the world.

Living in a so-called technological society challenges us to learn in flexible, inclusive, participatory, and interdependent ways. Moving beyond an instrumental use of technology—restricted to problem-solving and the reproduction of mechanical practices—this research explores dialogical, collaborative, and critical forms of engagement with technologies in educational contexts.

To move further, a complex approach offers the analytical lens needed to grasp the entangled realities of digital culture and teacher education. Thus, research in complex contexts implies recognizing the diverse ways in which knowledge is collectively produced, understood, and put into practice. Morin (2000) draws attention to the growing distance between fragmented disciplinary knowledge and the problems of the contemporary world, which are configured as broad, interconnected, multidimensional, and globally-reaching realities. It is through these diverse contexts and realities that we are driven to dialogue. This is because, as bell Hooks (2010) states, the act of learning and conversing together deconstructs the idea that knowledge is acquired in isolation, individualistically, and competitively. On the contrary, when we choose and dedicate ourselves to dialogue, we create a relationship of mutual collaboration in the learning process.

Despite containing a multitude of individual aspects, a person remains a single, distinct subject. Therefore, Morin (2011) emphasizes that the underlying principles of our diverse characteristics are rooted in our shared human unity. According to the author, the unexpected often catches us by surprise because we tend to become too comfortable and rigid in our existing theories and ideas, which are not designed to accommodate novelty. However, new developments constantly emerge, and while we cannot predict their form, we should anticipate their arrival. When the unexpected does manifest, it is crucial to be able to revise our theories and ideas rather than attempting to force new facts to fit into inadequate theoretical frameworks (Morin, 2002).

5 Weaving meanings: Sharing digital narrative dialogues

Delving into the data produced during the dialogic cycles, we present some of the participants' voices, explaining their understandings of digital cultures as they relate to educational processes and teaching practices

5.1 Diversity of knowledge and collaboration in digital cultures

We identified that one of the central meanings attributed to digital cultures concerns the recognition of diversity and the coexistence of multiple forms of knowledge within educational contexts. In the participants' narratives, digital cultures were not understood merely as technological environments, but as spaces where different epistemologies and voices can emerge and interact. This perspective became particularly evident in the reflections of one of the teacher

educators, who indicated the importance of recognizing and valuing diverse forms of knowledge in participatory research processes:

[...] we revive... the idea that knowledge comes in different forms, can be produced in different ways, and should be disseminated in different ways. [...] So that's why we look at different forms of knowledge, such as traditional knowledge, indigenous knowledge, ancestral knowledge, and we try to find ways to disseminate them accordingly. [...] the question of how participatory research contributes to challenging these cycles of exclusion and marginalization, not only between communities, the periphery, and the centres, but also within communities. So, for participatory research, it's important not only to fight for inclusion and justice, but also how these struggles are reflected within communities, how communities, the excluded voices of communities, can be considered and taken into account. (English Teacher Educator)

The participant's statement reveals an understanding of digital cultures aligned with inclusive and participatory epistemologies, in which knowledge production is not restricted to academic or institutional spaces. Instead, it involves the recognition of traditional, indigenous and ancestral knowledge, as well as the need to create conditions for their circulation and visibility. In this sense, the dialogue resonates with perspectives that question hierarchical and exclusionary forms of knowledge production, reinforcing the importance of collaborative and participatory approaches in educational research.

5.2 Pedagogical sensitivity and affect in digital cultures

The dialogic cycles revealed that discussions about digital cultures were frequently associated with the need for pedagogical sensitivity when addressing diversity in educational contexts. Participants emphasized that the integration of digital technologies in teaching requires more than technical knowledge; it also demands attentiveness to students' different ways of learning, interacting and responding within educational processes. This perspective emerged clearly in the narrative of one of the Brazilian teacher educators:

So we have all of this, right? Hence the importance of knowing these technologies that can be used for others as well. It's also important to have the sensitivity to recognize that there are differences in learning, feedback, and, you know, student responses. Therefore, we also need to diversify the way we access them, the way we relate to them, the way we evaluate them, and everything else. (Brazilian Teacher Educator)

This statement suggests that pedagogical engagement in digital contexts involves not only technical adaptation but also relational and interpretive work, highlighting tensions between standardization and responsiveness to student diversity.

Another element that emerged from the narratives was the connection between sensitivity, inclusion and affect in educational practices. One of the teachers pointed out that although assistive technologies are essential for supporting students with disabilities, technological resources alone do not ensure inclusive educational relationships. According to the participant, teacher involvement and sensitivity are fundamental for building relationships of acceptance and belonging within the learning process.

This understanding can be interpreted in light of Freirean concepts of human beings as historical and unfinished subjects. For Freire (1987), educational practices should recognize individuals as beings in continuous becoming, whose learning processes are shaped through dialogue and interaction with others. From this perspective, pedagogical sensitivity becomes central to creating educational environments that acknowledge diversity and foster meaningful participation

5.3 Humanity and inclusion in digital cultures

The dialogic cycles also revealed that discussions about digital cultures in educational contexts were strongly connected to issues of inclusion and the recognition of human diversity. Participants emphasized that the use of digital technologies in education should not be reduced to technical or instrumental dimensions but must also consider relational and affective aspects of teaching and learning.

One of the Brazilian teachers suggested that inclusive educational practices require attention to students with disabilities, emphasizing that technological resources alone are not sufficient to create meaningful educational relationships. According to the participant, although assistive technologies are important, they cannot replace the human dimensions of teaching, such as care, acceptance and teacher involvement in the learning process.

This perspective dialogues with Hernández-Hernández (2018), who argues that affects emerge in pedagogical encounters when subjectivities meet knowledge. These encounters cannot be predetermined or reduced to the use of technological tools; rather, they arise through interactions between subjects. From this perspective, educational and research processes become spaces of transformation when individuals engage with one another as subjects in continuous processes of becoming.

The importance of recognizing the human dimension in contexts permeated by digital technologies was also emphasized by other participants. A Brazilian teacher educator, reflecting on her experience in a school with a large number of students with disabilities, stressed the need to see students first as individuals rather than defining them by their diagnoses: “We need to see the human being, the individual, before the disability... We need to think of them as an individual”. (Brazilian Teacher Educator)

This statement suggests an ethical and pedagogical stance that prioritizes the recognition of the person beyond labels or classifications. Such understanding reinforces the idea that inclusive educational practices depend not only on resources or institutional policies but also on teachers’ sensitivity to students’ singularities.

Similarly, an English teacher educator emphasized the inseparability of thinking and feeling in participatory research processes, pointing out that human beings are not only rational but also affective subjects whose experiences are shaped through relationships with others.

In addition to these perspectives, the African teacher educator introduced the philosophy of Ubuntu during the dialogic cycles, bringing attention to the collective and relational dimensions of humanity. Ubuntu emphasizes the interconnectedness between individuals and indicates that learning occurs through relationships and shared experiences. In this sense, pedagogical practices inspired by this philosophy seek to strengthen collaborative learning, group work and the recognition of the diverse cultural and linguistic resources that students bring to educational environments.

Taken together, these narratives suggest that educational practices within digital cultures require not only technological competence but also a strong commitment to humanizing pedagogies. Inclusion, affect and relationality emerge as central elements for creating learning environments that recognize diversity and promote meaningful participation.

5.4 A critical stance towards digital cultures and discourses of innovation

The data analysis suggested the emergence of a theme related to the need for a critical stance towards digital cultures and the discourses that frequently present them as neutral or naturally beneficial solutions for education. Participants emphasize that the relationship with digital

technologies should not occur uncritically, especially when the educational field is based on principles such as inclusion, sensitivity, affection, and humanization.

In this sense, one of the participants points out that it can be dangerous to develop an attachment to technologies without a critical analysis of their impacts and implications. This perspective points to the need to understand that digital cultures are not homogeneous or automatically positive phenomena, as they permeate and transform social and educational life in different ways, requiring contextualized observation and appropriation.

This position also appears in the reflection of one of the participating teachers, who problematizes the attempt to understand digital environments from classic pedagogical frameworks, such as the thought of Paulo Freire. When questioning how Freire would react to observing educational practices mediated by screens and virtual boxes, the participant reveals a tension between pedagogical conceptions based on face-to-face interaction and the challenges posed by digital environments: "Would Paulo Freire say if he went through that door and saw all these people in the computer boxes? [...] Freire's idea is the idea of the circle, the idea of intentional learning, that learning that happens in the corridor, in the park, in the cafeteria, in the relations between communities." (Canadian Teacher Educator)

This reflection suggests that the incorporation of digital technologies in education requires more than simply adapting established concepts; it requires problematization, pedagogical reinvention, and openness to new questions. As the participant himself points out, the more researchers try to understand and experience digital cultures, the more challenges and uncertainties emerge, revealing the complexity of this field.

Furthermore, the data also indicate the need to critically analyze discourses on educational innovation. As Nóvoa (2000) argues, any discourse of success or innovation can become dangerous when it becomes fashionable, favoring superficial or reductionist appropriations that disregard the complexity of educational practices. This perspective dialogues with Freire's conception of education. For Freire (1996), human existence is not determined by fixed structures, but constitutes a permanent process of historical and social construction. Thus, instead of passively accepting technological transformations as inevitable, this perspective indicates the importance of problematizing the future and recognizing the multiple possibilities for action and transformation.

In this way, the analysis shows that the participants not only describe experiences with digital cultures, but also develop a reflective and critical stance, questioning both technological limitations and discourses that tend to naturalize or idealize the presence of technologies in education.

6 Beyond the full stop: Final reflections and the ongoing movement of digital cultures and teacher education

The data revealed both similarities and differences in participants' conceptions, experiences, and practices regarding digital culture. The findings indicate the relevance of a critical, political, and ethically committed approach to digital education - one that values diversity and human relationships beyond technological imperatives.

Throughout the dialogical cycles, participants' narratives demonstrated that engagement with digital cultures is neither neutral nor homogeneous. Instead, it involves, tensions, negotiations, and reinterpretations shaped by social, pedagogical, and cultural contexts. In this sense, the study reinforces the importance of questioning homogenizing, standardized, and conservative

perspectives that still persist in digital educational environments, while promoting more inclusive and democratic re-significations.

Based on the narratives produced in the dialogical cycles, it is possible to affirm that human development is intrinsically linked to social transformation. As individuals interact with new spaces, environments, and resources - whether face-to-face or online - they reinterpret their experiences and construct knowledge collectively. In this process, Knowledge becomes a concrete element of cultures, including digital ones.

The international composition of the dialogic cycles, bringing together teachers from four different countries, reflects both the dynamics of globalization and the challenges of building collaborative practices in pluralistic and interconnected contexts. Rather than perceiving diversity as fragmentation or loss, the participants' experiences suggest that intercultural dialogue can become a powerful source of enrichment and learning. From this perspective, interculturality should not remain merely a conceptual ideal, but be enacted as a practice within educational and technological contexts.

The dialogical cycles have demonstrated that by valuing cultural diversity and promoting collaboration between cultures, it is possible to devise other ways of teaching and learning in the context of digital cultures.

We conclude that the training processes, the practices of teachers developed in contexts of digital cultures, must be viewed from a different perspective, one that denaturalizes the position and the instituted and resignifies homogeneous and exclusive perspectives.

We advocate for training processes and digital cultural practices that prioritize social, pedagogical, and political mediation and adopt critical stances to promote democratic, inclusive, emancipatory, and high-quality education.

Within this framework, the concept of online dialogical cycles emerges as a contribution of this study. The cycles functioned as collaborative and reflective spaces in which participants engaged in sustained dialogue about their experiences with digital cultures. Unlike conventional online discussions or isolated training sessions, these cycles emphasized collective reflection, narrative sharing, and critical dialogue grounded in participants' lived experiences. In this sense, the concept contributes to discussions on online dialogue, participatory research, and digital teacher education by revealing the potential of dialogical encounters as spaces for critical reflection, intercultural exchange, and professional learning in digital environments.

However, this study also presents limitations that must be acknowledged. The research was conducted with a relatively small group of participants and within a specific collaborative context, which may limit the transferability of the findings. Additionally, the dialogical cycles took place over a defined period and relied primarily on narrative data generated through online interactions.

Future studies could expand this approach by including larger and more diverse groups of participants, exploring longer-term dialogical processes, and combining different methodological strategies to deepen the understanding of how teachers construct knowledge and professional identities within digital cultures. Further research may also explore how dialogical cycles operate in other educational contexts, such as institutional professional development programs, or hybrid learning environments. Investigating how these cycles influence pedagogical practices over time may provide valuable insights into their potential as a formative strategy in digital teacher education.

Rather than representing a final point, these findings point to the ongoing and dynamic nature of engaging with digital cultures, emphasizing the need for continuous reflection and collaborative knowledge construction in teacher education.

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Author's Contribution (CRediT)

MCLP: Conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, writing – original draft, writing – review & editing. The author has read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Data Availability

For reasons of privacy and confidentiality, the records of the dialogic cycles are stored in private files with access restricted to the researchers and are not publicly available. Anonymized data may be shared by the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Ethics and Consent

This study followed established ethical guidelines for research involving human participants (Certificate of Presentation for Ethical Review – CAAE – Brazil 83333118.9.1001.5162). All participants were informed about the objectives of the study and voluntarily agreed to take part in the research. Informed consent was obtained prior to data generation, including permission for recording the online dialogical cycles. Participants' identities were protected through anonymization, and all data were handled confidentially. The research process respected participants' autonomy, voices, and right to withdraw at any stage of the study.

Competing Interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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