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# DIGITAL PLATFORMS AND THE ELA CLASSROOM

A Policy Research Brief

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## What is a Digital Platform? And What Does It Have to Do with ELA?

Digital platforms are a fundamental part of today's English language arts classroom. Students read, write, view, connect, and interact with, on, and through a kaleidoscope of digital platforms. Google Docs, Turnitin, and Flip, among many others, have become part of the very infrastructure of classroom life (Garcia & Nichols, 2021). These same platforms are further used by educators, administrators, and third-party companies to instruct, assess, track, communicate with, respond to, and discipline students. Few areas of the classroom remain untouched by digital platforms.

A digital platform is a networked infrastructure that allows people to engage in various kinds of interactions: social, economic, political, educational. As one popular example, the social media service TikTok is a digital platform because it enables people to create, share, and monetize content, while accumulating money for itself through advertisements directed at users based on their activities. In this way, digital platforms create value for users by offering (free or paid) services; they also simultaneously create value for themselves and others by extracting, processing, and often selling the data they collect about users. These processes are facilitated by algorithms, user interfaces, computer code, hardware devices, and server farms, all of which are carefully designed to create value for and out of users. Digital platforms like Google Docs,

Turnitin, and Flip create educational value in ELA because they equip teachers with tools for instruction and assessment, and students with tools for creativity and connection. Today, digital platforms are incredibly popular in schools, notably in the wake of COVID-19's disruption to face-to-face instruction and education's sudden digital

migration. Worldwide, millions of students write with Google Docs, have their writing

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scanned for plagiarism by Turnitin, and share videos with their teachers using Flip to build vibrant classroom communities. These same platforms track and extract data about user behavior, which is processed and redirected back to users as new features designed to encourage more use (Williamson, 2017).

The spread of platform technologies in education is wide and deep. On a given day, schools rely on dozens of digital platforms to facilitate instruction, interaction, and learning. Imagine a hypothetical student in an ELA classroom. Upon entering class, they might log in to their laptop using a single sign-on platform (Clever), which gives them access to a suite of other platform-based resources to which the school subscribes. They locate the day's assignments through a content management platform (Google Classroom), which might link them to platforms for supplemental content (YouTube), skill-building activities (noredink), note-taking (Google Docs),

collaboration (Padlet), and assessment (Kahoot!). Before submitting an assignment, they run it through a writing assistance platform (Grammarly), and their teacher uses a plagiarism detection platform (Turnitin) and a feedback platform (Kaizena) to evaluate and respond to their work. If they are off-task that day, their teacher might record this in a class management platform (Class Dojo) or message the student’s guardian through a home-school communication platform (Seesaw). Further, their teacher might use information and data generated from any and all of these platforms to make decisions about future lessons, activities, and instructional interventions. The total saturation of platforms in schools—not just by tech-forward teachers but increasingly for everyone—is so complete that virtually anything done for, with, or to students in ELA classrooms today can be facilitated through platform technologies. Consequently, they have

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- implications
- for both
- the basic
- functioning
- of the
- classroom (i.e.,
- attendance,
- parental
- messaging) as

well as for administration, school boards, and state testing.

While ELA classrooms are no strangers to commercial products (Pearson textbooks, Calkins Units of Study, etc.) or third-party software (recall Microsoft Encarta), digital platforms differ both in their ability to collect huge amounts

of data from users (often without their knowledge) and to adapt in real-time to user inputs (and so create unique experiences, recommendations, and content for each student). For example, educators are all currently struggling with how to address ChatGPT and similar AI programs—platforms which both generate and collect original text—whose ramifications we are only beginning to grasp (Robinson, 2023). While teachers and students may indeed find value in the ease of notetaking facilitated by Evernote or the quality of writing support they receive from Revision Assistant, each of these platforms come with a series of tensions: most pressingly, they may encourage teachers to bend instruction toward the platform’s design features, rather than toward their desired teaching goals. These tensions mark digital platforms not simply as good or bad, useful or unredeemable, but rather require us to focus on how each platform is simultaneously being used and using us as educators. Given the tensions, the purpose of this policy brief is to clarify the role of platforms in schools and address central concerns associated with the increasingly complex digital ecosystem created by platforms. In what follows, we first overview the research dedicated to digital platforms in English language arts, and conclude by making recommendations for classroom practice and educational policy.

### **Digital Platforms in ELA Education**

The move toward digital platformization in schools has not emerged in vacuum; education has long been interested in



the promises of scientific management, efficiency, and standardizations (Trujillo, 2014), and the alluring potential of automated feedback, real-time responsive learning, and data-driven instruction (Neuman, 2016). Today, these familiar impulses are compounded by the myths of “Big Data” (Cope & Kalantzis, 2016)—that generating more and more data means a better understanding of learning (boyd & Crawford, 2011). Platform technologies capture clicks, engagement, and other micro-interactions and can provide that information through visually appealing data dashboards and maps (Smith et al., 2017)—these help to make large volumes of data legible for teachers and administrators. Before the rise of digital platforms, legislation like NCLB and ESSA normalized student surveillance and documentation, the disaggregation of testing data to determine high and low performing schools, and the implementation of “value added” systems of teacher evaluation (Darling-Hammond, 2015). Collectively, the interests and promises driving today’s digital platformization are not new, but are newly facilitated by corporations peddling “edtech solutions” (Watters, 2023) to long-standing problems in schools.

Teachers and districts adopt digital platforms for many reasons. Platforms can offer educators a great deal of value: oversight and connection, the ability to ground claims about student work in large data sets, and the bells and whistles that come with a corporately produced digital product (high-quality video meetings, easy to produce forms and surveys, attractive layout and design,

etc.). Teachers and districts work with platforms in various degrees of adoption: some make platforms like Google Classroom or Turnitin foundational to their day-to-day instruction or mandate their use with students, while others take a more case-by-case approach (Pangrazio et al., 2022). Where we acknowledge that digital platforms clearly add value to many ELA classrooms, we offer here a series of tensions for educators to consider. In particular, we highlight pressing concerns in the areas of data privacy and surveillance, equity, and the differential impacts of platforms on historically marginalized groups. Each of these serve as a caution for teachers and administrators as they add, purchase, work with, and reconsider digital platforms for their classrooms and districts.

### Platforms, Data, Privacy, and Surveillance Concerns

Whenever people use digital devices and platforms, their use is constantly tracked: what they click, how quickly they swipe, how long they stay on a webpage, etc. The data that results is used in many ways, including for

basic tasks that are required for the platform to function. However, these data are also used to make decisions on

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behalf of and about users. How a person interacts with a platform (the data they create) is fed into coding apparatuses on the backend of the platform to change



the experience of using the platform (Eubanks, 2018). Consequently, decisions about the experience of the platform are made on behalf of the user—different search results come to the top, different posts are shown on a feed, different tasks are shown to a student. The promise of these educational platforms is that this can personalize the learning tasks.

However, such use results in decisions being made about students' learning trajectories in troublesome ways. The speed at which a student answers a question on Kahoot!, for example, feeds into decisions about whether that student knows the material the best. Likewise, educators are provided dashboards with data chosen by the companies that created the platform. These data, such as completion rate or time usage, can skew teachers' perceptions simply based on its display settings and labels (Baym, 2013). Such platform defaults and conditions of use, argues Williamson (2017), govern how they are used in schools, including what activities and forms of knowledge production students engage in. In these ways, profiling learners can have normative effects on learning activities, leading to increased didactic pedagogies in classrooms (Smith et al., 2017)—the instruction bends toward the design features of the app, instead of the other way around (Nichols & LeBlanc, 2020).

The algorithms and platform-use data, both of which are used to make decisions about people, have become big business—not just in education but across society (Zuboff, 2019). In order to access and use many platforms, people need to sign

away rights to their content and use data. Data used and stored by platforms can be mobilized by the company for other projects and can be subsequently sold to third-party vendors, often without the knowledge of users. These data can also be hacked and used to identify and mimic individuals online—and in the case of K–12 schooling, this includes personal information about minors. Such privacy concerns have led some state legislatures to institute student privacy protection laws and policies. Many of these laws, however, turn back the responsibility of vetting and negotiating differing terms of service, conditions of use, privacy provisions and defaults with platforms to school and district administrators, many of whom have little to no background in the technical and legal aspects of such negotiations. This only further increases the administrative control of classroom decision making (Perrotta et al., 2021; Smith, 2021). Consequently, the expanded use of digital platforms in schools results not only in an increase in data produced but also the increased surveillance of learners, teachers, and curricular and pedagogical decisions (Watters, 2023).

### Differential Impacts of Platform Technologies in Education

Another critical concern for teachers and researchers is the finding that platforms have a differential impact on students from historically marginalized backgrounds. Where the promise was that historically inequitable educational outcomes would be disrupted by

technologies, they have instead persisted in the era of digital media. This is particularly true for marginalized students. Educational technologies have not transcended inequality; rather, they now intersect with accountability movements and standardized testing, deficit orientations of educators toward students and their communities, and the

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- continued
- exclusion
- of student
- identities and
- abilities from
- classrooms
- (Margolis,
- 2017).
- Pedagogies
- through which

marginalized students are subjected to simplified and demeaning curricula are now simply digitized (Watkins, 2018).

In addition, the era of digital media and educational technology is also the era of accountability culture, neoliberal reforms, and a sharp rise in incarceration, all increasingly understood as interrelated (Greene, 2021). Although digital inequalities are very real, the concept of the digital divide (van Dijk, 2020) has been used to justify reforms which favor investing in educational technologies to the exclusion of other critical areas (Cuban, 2009). Technology is posited as a means to escape poverty, even as government social spending, infrastructural, and anti-poverty programs are dramatically reduced. In this way, discourses within and around digital platforms work to reinforce racialized and meritocratic narratives

as they intersect with other oppressive ideologies and designs within schools (Aguilera & de Roock, 2022). Platform technologies further result in the disproportionate surveillance, policing, and incarceration of minoritized youth, including within schools (Benjamin, 2019).

As one prominent example of this differential impact, Noble’s (2018) analysis of the Google search engine—arguably the most widely used search platform—revealed algorithmic biases that skewed toward returning racialized and sexualized results for the term “Black girls.” While tech apologists may claim that the platform simply reflects underlying prejudices in its users, recent scholarship has demonstrated how these technologies also serve to reinforce systems of racialized, gendered, and class-based oppression (Eubanks, 2018). If ELA classrooms are to become places where “students conduct research on issues and interests” (IRA & NCTE, 1996, Standard 7) using a “variety of technological and information resources” (IRA & NCTE, 1996, Standard 8), those classrooms should also be empowered to address what Noble has called “algorithms of oppression” that are designed into these platforms. Where schools talk a great deal today about the critical importance of media literacy, a sustained focus on the role of algorithms and digital platforms is largely missing (Nichols & LeBlanc, 2021).

As research on the differential impacts of educational platforms continues to develop, educational stakeholders should be prepared to address these evolving issues. This need increases as newer and



emerging technologies—digital learning platforms, machine learning, natural language processing, AI, and surveillance technologies such as facial recognition—steadily find their ways into school and become central to the schooling experience. We see an urgent need to address how educational technology may be perpetuating or alleviating student marginalization and criminalization.

### Recommendations for Policy and Practice

We conclude with recommendations for teachers, administrators, and policymakers who implement digital platforms in the ELA classroom. We outline three overlapping areas for

Even when a platform seems to be the right choice for a particular learning goal or scenario, it may not always be the right moment to introduce a new tool

- action: (1) *choosing*,
- (2) *using*, and (3)
- *critiquing* digital
- platforms for
- learning.
- 1. *Choosing*
- Platforms: Teachers
- and administrators
- do not always have a
- choice about which
- platforms they and
- their students will
- use. In many cases,

they also lack options about how or when they must use them. However, when educational stakeholders at state, district, school, and classroom levels do have the opportunity to decide what platforms to use, we offer several considerations:

a. *Investigate privacy practices.* Learn what data the platform collects on its users and what happens to that data (Lynch 2015). Although reading the terms of

service in full for every platform under consideration may not be feasible, reports from organizations such as Common Sense Media can help decision makers understand the privacy implications of their choice. Ensure that the platform’s data practices align with all applicable laws, district policies, and students’ rights.

b. *Weigh the time and energy involved in implementation.* The implementation cost of a platform includes much more than the purchase amount. Decision makers should consider the labor involved in the implementation of any particular platform, including the time and effort involved in setting up and learning to use, navigate, interpret, and report on data generated on that platform. We also caution against the rapid adoption of multiple platforms without consideration of the platform fatigue that can set in when teachers, students, and their families are tasked with downloading, learning, and using new platforms too frequently. Even when a platform seems to be the right choice for a particular learning goal or scenario, it may not always be the right moment to introduce a new tool. Decision makers should consider both the timing and type of platform adoption.

c. *Evaluate embedded philosophies of teaching and learning.* Consider how the tasks, design, and content of the platform frames teaching and learning and whether that aligns with one’s own beliefs and approaches. For example, if a platform penalizes students for using “hints” (e.g., Khan Academy math exercises) or provides learning analytics data to students (e.g., in Canvas), reflect



on how such practices will shape the learning environment and foster equity. Consider whether the platform is accessible to all students regardless of their economic status and physical ability, and how it provides opportunities for expression of students' complex identities and builds upon their community and cultural resources.

2. *Using Platforms:* Educators often have choices about how they use platforms in practice, and we recommend that educators using platforms to enhance student learning, protect their privacy, and foster equitable learning opportunities consider these actions:

a. *Be transparent about platform and data use.* One way that teachers can exert control over the presence of platforms in their classrooms is by being transparent with their students about the platform's purpose, the types of data it collects, and how such data is used and shared. For example, many students are unaware that a learning management system like Canvas collects data about how long they are logged into the platform and how such data may be used to assess them. Others may be unaware of the ways in which a platform like Turnitin gathers and reports data about their writing. We recommend having conversations with students about these aspects of platform design so learners can use them formatively and take ownership over their engagement with the platform in full knowledge of how such engagement is leveraged by others.

b. *Align platform uses with learning goals.* We suggest that anyone using

a platform—whether by choice or by mandate—does so in careful consideration of how long students are asked to engage with their devices on a given day, how the platform's reports align or do not align with equitable and accurate assessments of student learning, and how a platform's design supports or detracts from the learning goals and specific needs of a classroom. When considering these questions for a mandated platform, teachers may want to investigate and adjust that platform's default settings. For example, some platforms are set to automatically collect data about students that a teacher may find irrelevant or detrimental to their own assessment of students' learning. Educators can either change those settings or not use those metrics in their grading. When modifications are not possible, we reiterate the importance of transparency with students.

3. *Critiquing Platforms:* Finally, we suggest that anyone using platforms for student learning engage in regular reflection on the platform's design, use, and effects and advocate on students' behalf when possible. We suggest that educational stakeholders:

a. *Critique platforms as part of sustainable professional development.* Reflection on and investigation into platforms is a time- and labor-intensive process and should be incorporated into and compensated as professional development. For example, teachers can be supported in forming professional learning communities in which they conduct "equity audits" into the platforms they choose and are required to use (Pollock, 2016), inquiring



together into the ideologies, assumptions, and beliefs about teaching and learning inherent in platform design and business models. Making these conversations visible is one way to resist the default positioning of platforms and open space for collective action.

b. *Advocate for change.* We also encourage teachers, administrators, and policymakers to collaboratively advocate for reforms to how platforms are used

when they are misaligned with teachers' and students' needs and values.

These considerations for choosing, using, and critiquing platforms are not separate steps to be performed consecutively or in isolation from one another. Decisions about which platforms to use and how to use them are complex and co-occurring and should be made in collaboration, with time and support for reflexivity, and in pursuit of educational equity.

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