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Socio-Cultural Issues in Educational Technology Integration

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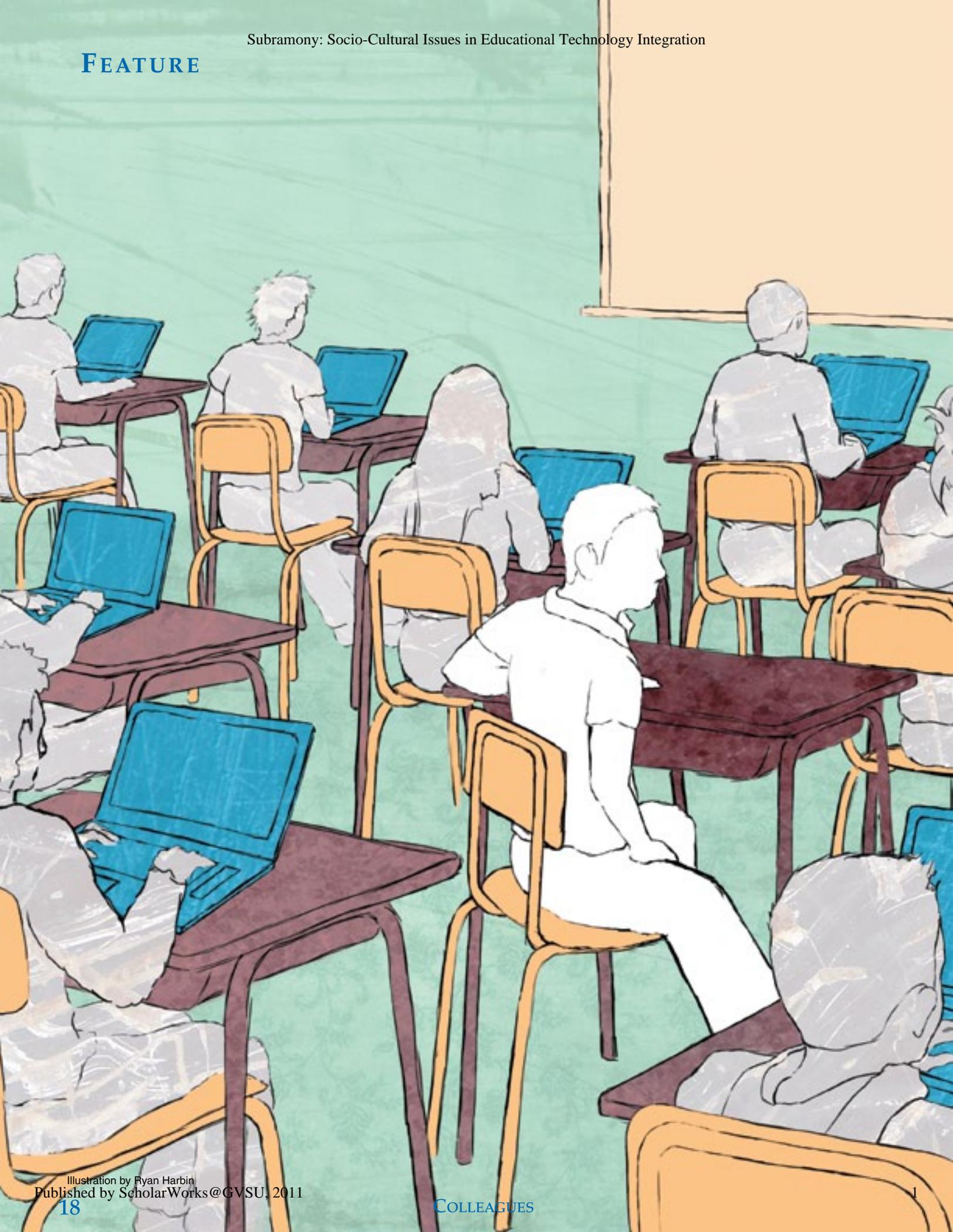
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FEATURE



Socio-Cultural Issues in Educational Technology Integration

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This essay summarizes three major socio-cultural issues confronting the field of educational technology as we end the first decade of the 21st century: (a) Equitable access to—and proficiency in—information and communications technologies (ICT) in light of their increasing integration into teaching, learning, workflows and lifestyles; (b) the transformative impact of ICT integration on the lives and communities of cultural minority learners; and (c) the inattention within the mainstream educational technology discourse to the characteristics, perspectives, needs and aspirations of a rapidly diversifying target learner/ICT-user population.

— Continued on page 20



Inequitable access to ICT tools/resources— a.k.a. the Digital Divide—could reasonably be described as one of the great social justice issues of the early 21st century. For some decades now, social scientists have been describing how ICT represent the means of production (see Touraine, 1971; Lyotard, 1984) within our current post-industrial, Information-Age socioeconomic system in which knowledge constitutes the central resource (see Drucker, 1969; Toffler, 1980). ICT therefore possess tremendous emancipatory potential to those who have access (and knowledge/skills related to) them; consequently, those lacking ICT access, knowledge and skills risk remaining trapped in a vicious downward spiral of disempowerment and alienation. It is important to emphasize that, while most traditional discussions of the Digital Divide focus primarily on the issue of equitable access to ICT—and consequently on providing technologically disadvantaged populations with access to ICT tools/resources (Morino, 2000)—the issue of equitable ICT proficiency is actually far more crucial. As Morino explains, the core concern is related to inequitable engagement and learning opportunities for technologically disadvantaged groups arising from a lack of meaningful opportunities to apply ICT effectively in an empowering and emancipatory manner toward the achievement of meaningful educational and professional outcomes. Or as Tapscott (2000) succinctly states, the issue is not just access to ICT, but rather the availability of services, technology fluency, motivation, and opportunities to learn; he warns that inequitable ICT access and proficiency “will splinter society into a race of information haves and have-nots, knowers and know-nots, doers and do-nots.” (p. 127) In other words, in order to be able to fully harness the emancipatory power of ICT to uplift oneself socioeconomically, one needs to not only (a) have access to the requisite ICT tools/resources, but also (b) know how to use these in an appropriately empowering manner, (c) and actually integrate (do) them meaningfully into one’s life, learning, and work.

Furthermore, it is important to understand that true empowerment through ICT use comes when individuals, groups, and nations possess producer-level ICT knowledge and skills. Most ICT users, especially those from technologically disadvantaged social/cultural groups, even when provided with adequate access to ICT tools/resources, display very superficial skill-sets related to ICT. They may exhibit remarkable mastery over the consumer level of interaction—both appropriate and inappropriate—with ICT, such as Web surfing and content downloading, electronic synchronous and asynchronous communication—including Web 2.0 interactions, e-commerce transactions, and gaming, but few take the time and effort to acquire or practice any significant ICT skills at the producer level, such as programming, design, or hardware competencies (see

Subramony: Socio-Cultural Issues in Educational Technology Integration

Subramony, 2007). As Morino and Tapscott (1992) for a pioneering exploration of this issue. Thankfully, for much of human history these sins of omission were of little consequence, given the relatively restricted socio-economic, geographical and cultural reach of ICT. However, in today’s globalizing, info-centric world, such intellectual myopia on the part of educational technologists has the potential to be damaging; as Schwen (2003, personal communication) described, “We (as a profession) have only recently become proficient enough to do harm.” As Subramony (2004) details, inappropriate/insensitive ICT solutions spawned by culturally tone-deaf educational technologists, when combined with preexisting structural factors such as inequitable access to ICT tools/resources, language barriers, and a lack of culturally suitable mentors/role-models to exemplify ICT use, lead to a further alienation of technologically disadvantaged individuals/groups from the emancipatory potential of ICT, setting in motion yet another vicious downward spiral of disempowerment. ☹

Meanwhile, rapidly strengthening forces of globalization, Westernization and human mobility are leading ICT to impact the lives and communities of an increasingly diverse population of target learners/users; parts of the world and sections of human society that were hitherto unaffected by the cultural impact of techno-centrism and technological advocacy are now being transformed—often negatively—by these ideological approaches. On the one hand, Western industrial societies are becoming ever



more racially, ethnically, linguistically and culturally diverse, thanks to an increased influx of new arrivals in recent decades following the repeal of racist, exclusionary immigration

laws, a globalizing economic landscape, and more efficient transportation links. Besides, these multicultural, polyglot newcomers are no longer confining their destinations to traditional immigrant gateways like New York, Miami and Los Angeles; rather, they are going directly to the locations of their target employment, which are often small communities in the continental heartland that have traditionally encountered very little social/cultural diversity (see Sontag, 1993 for an early account of this phenomenon). Simultaneously, globalizing forces are also extending the reach of ICT into geographical areas and human populations—ranging from vast nations like China and India to tiny, isolated groups like the Iñupiat of arctic Alaska (see Subramony, 2006a; 2006b)—that were unexposed to these technologies and their accompanying cultural/ideological values until relatively recently.

Through all of this, mainstream discourse within the field of educational technology—comfortably ensconced in an erroneous conviction that ICT are culturally neutral (see Bowers, Vasquez, & Roaf, 2000)—has remained remarkably indifferent to the needs and aspirations of culturally diverse learners, ever since arising from its historical roots in the conservative, patriarchic, Eurocentric military/industrial sphere—see Jamison

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