BECOMING ANTI-OPPRESSIVE EDUCATORS IN OPEN, ONLINE SPACES:
PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS’ PERCEPTIONS OF DIGITAL IDENTITY
AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

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By
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Katia Bettina Hildebrandt, candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education, has presented a thesis titled, *Becoming Anti-oppressive Educators in Open, Online Spaces: Pre-Service Teachers’ Perceptions of Digital Identity And Social Justice*, in an oral examination held on July 20, 2021. The following committee members have found the thesis acceptable in form and content, and that the candidate demonstrated satisfactory knowledge of the subject material.

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Abstract

This dissertation presents key understandings and conclusions drawn from my research into teacher candidates’ perceptions of digital identity, particularly as it relates to the process of becoming anti-oppressive educators. The results of this study provide the beginning of an answer to the following question, which I see as a critical point of inquiry in our increasingly digital world: *As institutions of higher education experiment with blended and online learning models, how will these new learning spaces support or hinder the work of anti-oppressive education?* The study traces a series of critical conversations with seven students enrolled in a four-year teacher education program at a mid-sized university in western Canada; these conversations are focused primarily on the students’ experiences in a mandatory class on anti-oppressive curriculum, in which they were enrolled in either the second or third year of the program. The research was conducted using a post-critical theoretical framework to identify and analyze the discourses underpinning pre-service teachers’ perceptions of their own and others’ digital identities; semi-structured interviews served as the primary source of data. Given the critical lens, the goal of the study was not just to understand these discourses but to work with participants to find ways in which teacher education programs might provide a framework for helping students to develop positive digital footprints and to feel confident and prepared to enact the role of anti-oppressive educator in online spaces. Consequently, an important element of the research was the process of what I have chosen to call a collaborative discourse analysis, that is, the process by which I worked together with participants to analyze their beliefs and perceptions in order to co-construct potential solutions to the myriad complexities of teacher digital identity. Prior to beginning data
collection, I conducted a comprehensive review of relevant literature with a particular focus on three key areas: an exploration of post-structural understandings of subjecthood, including how the process of subjectivation relates to the construction of teacher identity; a review of post-critical ethnography and its suitability as a theoretical framework and methodology for the proposed research; and an examination of the concept of digital identity, including an overview of various historical and contemporary theories. As well, additional literature was reviewed as needed during both the data gathering and analysis phases of the research. The dissertation begins with an overview of the context of the research, both with respect to digital identity and to anti-oppressive education, followed by the literature review and then by chapters that detail the theoretical and methodological foundations of the study and provide an introduction to the seven participants. After this, I turn to the two major themes that emerged in the research: the particular complexities of identity politics in online spaces and the challenges presented by dominant narratives of the “good teacher.” The final chapter of the dissertation outlines potential ways forward in light of the findings that surfaced in the course of the research, including the importance of interrogating and deconstructing dominant narratives in education, the potential benefits offered by “communities of discomfort,” and the possibilities inherent in the use of structured and mandated performances of particular identities. The dissertation concludes with a discussion of where we might go from here as we navigate the ever-increasing complexities of digital identity from a professional and anti-oppressive standpoint.

Key terms: digital identity; anti-oppressive education; discourse analysis; post-critical framework
Acknowledgements

I would like to first note that the majority of this research and writing was completed on Treaty 4 land, where I am fortunate to live and work, and I wish to acknowledge my position as a settler on this land, the territory of the nêhiyawak, Anihšināpēk, Dakota, Lakota, and Nakota peoples, and the homeland of the Métis people.

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Dedication

To my father: Despite holding a degree in English literature, words fail me in my attempt to articulate how fortunate I am to have you in my life. Thank you for your love, support, encouragement, and feedback, and for taking so long to finish your dissertation that I was able to complete mine in less time. *Endlich habe ich mein “Jura” beendet.*

To my mother, whose strength, intelligence, and passion for her work were unmatched, and who always told me not to pursue a doctorate unless I could not imagine doing anything else: I wish you were still here to see that I have found my passion.

And to my cats, Max and Lola, who were a constant presence by my side as I wrote this dissertation: Thanks for always believing in me.

*And one day we will die*
*And our ashes will fly*
*From the aeroplane over the sea*
*But for now we are young*
*Let us lay in the sun*
*And count every beautiful thing we can see*
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Foreword

Blog post #1 - On the act of writing - December 31, 2015

A few years ago, if you’d told me I would be writing a dissertation having anything to do with social media, I’d have laughed at you. A few years ago, I had just gotten a Twitter account and had used it...oh...maybe five times. Social media was a fun distraction, sure, but not much else.

For the past few days, I have been intently focused on finally getting my proverbial s*** together and finishing a draft of my dissertation, which deals, in large part, with social media and digital identity. But I don’t always have the best attention span. I get distracted by many things - organizing my books, vacuuming, obsessing over how many steps my Fitbit has recorded today, and, of course, social media. Some might even say that social media, and the Internet in general, gets in the way of my productivity. And sure, sometimes it does. Did I really need to re-read that hilarious blog post about why procrastinators procrastinate for the twentieth time? Probably not (but if you haven’t read it, you really should...). Did I have to look through the trending hashtags on Twitter to learn that the odd one that I couldn’t parse was, inevitably, about more One Direction drama (I kid you not — every single time)? Well, no.

But.

And that’s a big but (no pun intended).

But.

Social media is also a treasure trove of incredible information. The vast majority of the citations in my third comprehensive exam, about digital identity, came from Twitter - well, more specifically, from what I dug up by searching for my Twitter handle
+ #identity in order to access the scores of articles on the subject that I had carefully curated from others’ sharing over time. And social media is the gift that keeps on giving. Today, I was writing about why it is so critical that all of us, but especially educators, speak out for social justice in online spaces, even though it is potentially risky (and, as in my case, can lead to being trolled in a not-so-nice way). And on one of my social media breaks, I came across a fantastic post by Bonnie Stewart (2015) about the way that social media shapes our world. To quote Bonnie:

Facebook – and more broadly, social media in general…but Facebook remains for the moment the space of the widest participation across demographics even while targeting ads designed to keep people IN their existing demographics – is the stage upon which the battle over dominant cultural narratives is played out. Social media is where we are deciding who we are, not just as individual digital identities but AS A PEOPLE, A SOCIETY.

So writing my dissertation has been incredibly hard, but perhaps not for the reasons you might think. When I get into a rhythm, I am a prolific and rapid writer. But these days, I write mostly blog posts, and I find that my ability to write academically has been overtaken, in some ways, by my ability to blog. If I could blog my dissertation, I would. I’m a bit lost without the ability to hyperlink to other blogs or articles or people, and I feel that my writing suffers because of it. Because really, that’s the potential of social media, social writing, and Web 2.0: writing, publishing, literacy in general - it truly is now all about participation and collaboration. A good blog post is a good blog post because it links into a much wider web of knowledge, and it does so in a highly transparent and accessible way. Sure, we cite others in academic papers, but to access a
cited work we would usually have to search for it in an academic database or - *gasp* - go to the library. The way we think about knowledge is changing, at least when it comes to the digital sphere: as David Weinberger said, “The smartest person in the room *is* the room.” I even watched this shift play out in my research. What began as an ethnographic study/discourse analysis rapidly changed into something much more collaborative.

Instead of me sitting alone and analyzing my participants’ words, we sat there and picked them apart together - both their words and, at times, mine. We constructed (well, in the case of my research, deconstructed) understandings collaboratively. And the experience was so much richer because of it.

In a particularly depressing moment in *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad writes, “We live as we dream - alone.” In many ways, academia seems still to embrace this worldview - it might as well read, “I write [my dissertation] as I dream - alone.” But just as the power of Google Drive means I will never have to edit documents alone again, the ubiquity of social media means that I no longer have to write, read, think, or be an “expert” alone. Perhaps the academy should consider taking up this connected culture that we live in just a little bit more and, with it, a more social form of learning. After all, “We participate, therefore we are” (Seely Brown & Solomon Gray, 2003, n.p.).

And hey, I might even find a way to work this blog post into my dissertation.

*And I did.*
Chapter 1: The Research Context

This dissertation is an account of the key understandings and conclusions drawn from my doctoral research into teacher candidates’ perceptions of digital identity, particularly as it relates to the process of becoming anti-oppressive educators. The results of this study provide the beginning of an answer to the following question, which I see as a critical point of inquiry in our increasingly digital world: As institutions of higher education experiment with blended and online learning models, how will these new learning spaces support or hinder the work of anti-oppressive education?

However, this dissertation is also, perhaps unintentionally, about my own journey in understanding myself as an aspiring anti-oppressive educator and in learning to enact my beliefs both online and off. What began as an ethnographic study of a course environment and of my students’ perceptions became a much more collaborative process in which I was able to work alongside my students as we deconstructed the ways that we spoke and thought about teaching, about digital spaces, and about the process of becoming anti-oppressive educators. Like my students, I have been conditioned and produced by dominant discourses to act and think in particular ways while simultaneously being conditioned to see these actions and beliefs as natural, innate, and inevitable. Through this process, I believe that I was able to better understand, and work to counteract, my own complicity in the privileging and silencing of particular narratives online. Thus, alongside my participants’ stories, my own narrative is highlighted at times as well. This first chapter provides both the context and rationale for the research. I begin with an overview of the relevant literature in a number of key areas that inform my study; I discuss what I mean here by anti-oppressive education and the challenges inherent in
such a model of teacher education, and I explore the shifting landscape of our digital culture, particularly as it relates to education. I then describe the specific context for this research, which arose from and is based in large part around a blended-model\(^1\) curriculum course for which I was a co-instructor. Finally, I conclude the chapter by bringing these various threads and themes together in order to justify both my chosen research question specifically and, more generally, the need for research that addresses the intersection of digital identity and anti-oppressive education.

1.1 Understanding the Research Context

1.1.1 What Do We Mean by Anti-Oppressive Education?

In order to understand the aim of my research, it is first important to understand what I mean by the term “anti-oppressive education.” This term is used to denote a variety of educational approaches, so it is crucial to define the particular pedagogical framework to which I refer in this research. At its simplest, we might say that anti-oppressive education is education that has as its aim the identification and disruption of oppression in its various forms. The more general idea of anti-oppressive practice, which originates in the field of social work, is defined as the practice of “challenging established truths about identity [and] seek[ing] to subvert the stability of universalized biological representations of social division” (Dominelli, 2002, p. 39.) Kumashiro (2000), who has written extensively on the subject of anti-oppressive practices in teaching, notes

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\(^1\) Blended learning (sometimes also termed hybrid or flexible learning) can take many forms; generally, it refers to courses that contain a mixture of both face-to-face and online elements (Tayebnik & Puteh, 2013).
that educational researchers typically approach anti-oppressive education in one of four ways:

- education for the other, that is, attempting to ameliorate the experiences of oppressed groups in schools;
- education about the other, that is, working to uncover and address the ways in which curriculum itself is used to oppress particular groups;
- education that is critical of privileging and othering, that is, attending to the hegemonic structures of schooling that privilege some and marginalize others (for instance, by taking up a framework of critical pedagogy); and
- education that changes students and society, that is, understanding the ways in which oppression originates in problematic discourses (taking up a post-structural framework).

Kumashiro argues for the enactment of anti-oppressive education based on a combination of these four approaches alongside a continued exploration of other, potentially marginalized, approaches. It is to this amalgamated approach that I refer in this dissertation.

Two of the central features in Kumashiro’s (2009) conceptualization of anti-oppressive education (especially with respect to its application in both this research and my own pedagogical practices) are the ideas of troubling and partial knowledge. In the spirit of Derrida’s *différance*, Kumashiro uses both terms in a double sense. Troubling knowledge, for instance, is “knowledge that is disruptive, discomforting, and problematizing” (p. 9), that is, knowledge that goes against our commonsense understandings of the world; for example, learning about White privilege often
constitutes the introduction of troubling knowledge for (White-identifying) students, as it disrupts the dominant narrative of meritocracy. Taking “troubling” as a verb, however, we come to see troubling knowledge as the act of interrogating what counts as knowledge in a particular culture, an interrogation that Kumashiro sees as foundational to anti-oppressive education. The idea of partial knowledge has a similarly dual meaning for Kumashiro. Knowledge is always partial (that is, biased), so that what counts as knowledge will inevitably serve the dominant culture; and knowledge is always partial (that is, incomplete), meaning, in other words, that we as humans can never hope to have a complete understanding of anything in the world.

These two double terms are key elements of my own understanding of anti-oppressive education. They call for the constant interrogation of the world around us and our perceptions of it, the recognition that we are always in the process of becoming and knowing, and the need to invite uncomfortable knowledge into our classrooms. As I explore in greater detail in Chapter Two, the framework described above is essentially a post-critical approach to anti-oppressive education, which calls for the recognition and analysis of the normative discourses that shape schooling and society (including discourses that privilege particular groups and oppress others), while simultaneously aiming towards increased equity for marginalized groups.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the framework described above is frequently discomforting to students. Indeed, even outside of the realm of education, the act of pointing out, for instance, examples of privilege to those who benefit from it often results in extreme pushback, denial, or even *ad hominem* attacks directed at the person pointing them out (Hildebrandt, 2015). When working with pre-service teachers in particular,
typical patterns of student resistances to anti-oppressive education can be observed. Montgomery (2013) notes that White pre-service teachers typically resist knowledge of systemic racism in order to protect their own privilege, and that this resistance may take many forms, including the fear of looking like or being called racist. White teacher education candidates may also express concern about negative impacts to their future careers if they are deemed to be too controversial online (Montgomery, 2013).

Additionally, Montgomery (2013) summarizes and builds on Solomon et al. (2005)’s accounting of the three patterns of resistance that typically arise:

Solomon et al. (2005) delineate patterns including “ideological incongruence” (e.g., teacher candidates express belief in equity initiatives while also critiquing them as “reverse-discrimination”), “negation of White capital” (e.g., teachers deny the existence of both White privilege and structural or systemic racism), and “liberalist notions of individualism and meritocracy” (e.g., teacher candidates deny historical context and work to preserve the assumption that everyone has access to the same opportunities). (p. 7)

As I describe in greater detail later in this chapter, both the particular approach to anti-oppressive education described above and the typical patterns of resistance demonstrated by students played an important role in the emergence and development of my research question.

It is also important to note that the faculty in which I teach articulates a significant emphasis on the commitment to social justice. The faculty’s mission statement explicitly lists the development of social justice educators as a goal of the program, while the 2016-2021 Strategic Plan vision statement claims that the faculty will be a leader in “anti-
oppressive [emphasis added] undergraduate and graduate research, scholarship, teaching, learning and service” (Faculty of Education, 2015, p. 1). A recent external review also highlights the centrality of social justice across the various programs, noting that the Faculty of Education “vigorously pursues social justice on many fronts: teaching and curriculum development, research and scholarship, and community-based programming” (Frank, Reynolds, & Grande, 2017, p. 4). Thus, my own aim of helping students to become anti-oppressive educators is underscored and supported by the context in which I teach.

1.1.2 The Digital World

At the most basic level, it is important to understand that technology, and the connectedness that it enables, has become a ubiquitous presence in our daily lives, so much so that it is hard to escape even if one tries; indeed, in 2011, Internet access was declared a human right by the United Nations (Jackson, 2011). Unsurprisingly, the prevalence of technology has led to many changes in the world, and these shifts are apparent in the changing states of knowledge, society, and education. In turn, my understanding of the current digital landscape and its effect on the very fabric of our world has played an important role in the formulation of my research questions. Thus, in addition to the aforementioned explanation of what I mean by anti-oppressive education, it is also imperative, in the context of this thesis, to better understand our rapidly changing, connected world.

In today’s digital reality, Marshall McLuhan’s contention that “we shape our tools and afterwards our tools shape us” (Lapham, 1994, p. xxi) is evinced in myriad aspects of
our daily lives: our increasing connectedness has profoundly altered the ways in which we work and relate to each and has led, at the very least, to many cultural shifts, and perhaps even to a complete paradigm shift (Cross, 2011, referencing Thomas Kuhn). Hine (2000) outlines three major changes to the world in the Internet era: “changes to the role of time and space; changes to communication and the role of mass communication; and a questioning of dualisms such as the real and the virtual, truth and fiction, the authentic and the fabricated” (p. 5). Wellman (2002) writes that the increased presence of technology has altered the way that humans interact and work with each other, so that individual networks are now key to success, while Anderson and Rainie (2010) argue that there is a “fundamental shift” in the nature of human communities partly driven by technological change (p. 7). While humans were once tied to those in their immediate physical vicinity, the introduction of mobile technology has led to a shift in the social paradigm, from discrete, local groupings to more fluid, complex, "diffuse, variegated" networks that are less space/time-specific (Wellman, 2002, p. 1).

When it comes to learning, our connected reality has led to immense, and varied, shifts. Access to the Internet provides an immense wealth of information; our current age of the digital economy is “defined by the abundance of knowledge and participants as opposed to their scarcity” (McAuley et al., 2010, p. 8). The Internet has “vastly expanded access to all sorts of resources, including formal and informal educational materials,” and has led to cheaper (or even free) access to content (Brown & Adler, 2008). In a culture of rapid transmission, words and images “flit about at the speed of light and procreate with indecent rapidity, not arborially . . . as in a centralized factory, but rhyzomatically, at any decentered location” (Poster, 2001, p. 78). In addition, there is growing recognition that
learning can be done anywhere, at any time, and by anyone (Johnson et al., 2011), as well as a fundamental shift from individual to collaborative or constructivist learning approaches, which “highlight the importance of learners taking active roles in processing and interpreting new information as they co-construct new knowledge” (Chu et al., 2012, p. 990).

Along similar lines, another fundamental shift brought about by the Internet is the movement towards a culture of sharing. The advent of Web 2.0, also known as the “Read-Write Web” (Gillmor, 2004) marked a huge change in the way that the Internet was used; what was once primarily a tool for consumption of information was transformed into one where anyone (in theory) could create, publish, and contribute to the fount of global knowledge. Web 2.0 breaks down the idea of communication as “few to many,” substituting a “many to many” model where anyone with Internet access can be heard, allowing (in a world of equitable access) for a potential proliferation of stories. Remarking on the global excitement that accompanied the Numa Numa lipdub craze in 2004, Wesch (2008) notes:

It's a celebration of new forms of empowerment. You know, anybody with a webcam now has a stronger voice and presence. It's a celebration of new forms of community, and types of community that we've really never seen before, global connections, transcending space and time. It's a celebration of new and unimaginable possibilities.

As Wesch indicates, the shift in models of communication is revolutionary, and its effect is evident in many facets of culture.
Indeed, beyond the idea of increased potential presence for individuals online, the ease of sharing permitted by Web 2.0 tools has led to a fundamental change in the way that we interact with knowledge. Allocca (2011) notes that in the world of Web 2.0, “We don’t just enjoy now, we participate.” Accordingly, Jenkins (2006) terms the current ethos as a participatory culture, where there are “relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement” due to the ability to create and share easily with global audiences (p. 7). He notes that in such a culture, “Not every member must contribute, but all must believe they are free to contribute when ready and that what they contribute will be appropriately valued” (p. 7). Building on a constructivist view of learning, Brown and Adler (2008) remark that this culture of participation and sharing enables a shift to social learning, where the focus is on how we learn, rather than what is learned:

Instead of starting from the Cartesian premise of “I think, therefore I am,” and from the assumption that knowledge is something that is transferred to the student via various pedagogical strategies, the social view of learning says, “We participate, therefore we are.” (p. 18)

The collective begins to supersede the individual, leading to Weinberger’s (2012) assertion that “the smartest person in the room is the room.” Moreover, participation and sharing in online spaces allows for serendipitous learning opportunities as we connect with those outside of our local contexts (or “little boxes,” to quote Wellman, 2002). In a participatory culture, sharing our learning through openness and transparency becomes as significant as the learning itself; this point is echoed by numerous theorists. Wiley and Green (2012), for instance, write that “[e]ducation is, first and foremost, an enterprise of sharing. In fact, sharing is the sole means by which education is effected” (p. 82). Going
a step further, Siemens (2004) argues that this shift in learning necessitates an entirely new model of learning, which he terms “connectivism.” In this model (which is similar in some ways to social constructivism), rather than being located within the individual, learning today “can reside outside of ourselves (within an organization or a database), is focused on connecting specialized information sets, and the connections that enable us to learn more are more important than our current state of knowing” (“Connectivism,” para. 1). Echoing McLuhan’s argument for the importance of media over content, Siemens (2004) notes, “The pipe is more important than the content within the pipe. Our ability to learn what we need for tomorrow is more important than what we know today” (“Conclusion,” para. 1). Once again, the process of learning supersedes what is learned.

1.1.3 Digital Culture and Education Systems

Given the far-reaching implications of digital culture on everything from our relationships to the way we learn, it is perhaps unsurprising that we see the effects spilling into formal education systems as well. Indeed, as the paradigm of learning — and our understanding of knowledge and education — shifts, it seems inevitable that schools will need to reevaluate their role in learning. Ito (2011) writes that education is no longer (or should not be) “about centralized instruction anymore; rather, it is the process of establishing oneself as a node in a broad network of distributed creativity” (p. D9). At the K-12 level, accordingly, digital literacy standards are increasingly incorporated into curricula, as is evident in, for instance, the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE)’s standards for students (ISTE, 2016) and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Framework for 21st Century Curriculum and Assessment
In the local context, the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education’s Technology in Education Framework highlights the need for technology integration in classrooms and stipulates that both students and educators must work towards increased digital fluency (Ministry of Education, 2013); this is further supported by the Ministry of Education’s Digital Citizenship Education in Saskatchewan Schools policy guide (Couros & Hildebrandt, 2015), as well as the guide to digital fluency education that is slated for development in the near future. In higher education, the shift to digital is also evident. Stewart (2013) notes that learning management systems such as Blackboard and Moodle have been adopted in many university settings and are used to allow for online and blended instruction with varying degrees of openness; as well, the rise of the MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) movement in recent years coincides with the growing demand for online courses and increased awareness of the implications of knowledge abundance for institutions of higher education.

Given both the local and international demand for digital fluency, it seems logical that teacher education programs must also adapt to ensure that pre-service teachers are equipped with the skills they will need to navigate the complex intersection of school and technology. Patrick (2013) notes that teacher education must “modernize and adapt” to the new realities of education, so that “programs that provide teacher licensure preparation [are] responsible for training today’s teaching workforce for today’s educational needs, not yesterday’s ‘one classroom, one textbook’ model of lecture learning” (p. 4), while Cakir (2013) adds that “one of the factors for successful technology integration [...] is pre-service teacher education that includes how to use technology tools in the teaching and learning process,” and that teacher educators should
therefore model the use of such tools in pre-service courses (p. 244). In the provincial context, the Saskatchewan Teachers Federation recently released a graphic titled “Professionalism in the Digital World,” which includes the guideline, “As a digital citizen, model the behaviour you expect to see online from your students,” underscoring the need for teachers to participate in positive ways in online spaces (STF, 2017). And in our own faculty, the 2016-2021 Strategic Plan lists “Preparing students to participate, teach, and learn in a networked and digital world” as a supporting action in the commitment to student success (Faculty of Education, 2015, p. 3). Additionally, a recent external review of the faculty notes, “Faculty/Schools of Education must educate teachers to have the knowledge and ability to use a wide range of technology tools for varied purposes. Digital literacy skills are critical for 21st-century learning;” an increased attention to digital literacy in teaching and learning is therefore listed as an area for improvement (Frank, Reynolds, & Grande, 2017, p. 11). Thus, the importance of the digital world as it pertains to (teacher) education is made clear in both general and specific (and local) contexts.

1.2 Coming to the Inquiry

It is against this backdrop that my topic of inquiry began to take shape. As my own understanding of the digital landscape grew, I began to consider how (or if) our increasingly online reality was present in our teacher education program, and the answer, as far I could tell, was that it was not. Beyond the two classes that were specifically focused on educational technology (required only for math education students) and the occasional use of course wikis, there was very little engagement with digital spaces in the
undergraduate teacher education program. At the same time, however, I knew that the vast majority of our students were engaging online via Facebook, Twitter, or another social network; a 2015 Pew study found that fully 90% of young adults (aged 18-29) are social media users (Perrin, 2015). This raised the question: what were our students doing online, and how could we leverage the digital world in meaningful ways in our program? It was with these issues in mind that a colleague and I decided to integrate blogging into our ECS210 course.

1.2.1 The Research Context

This research was conducted at a mid-sized university in western Canada. At the time the research was conducted, I was employed as a sessional instructor in the Faculty of Education, where I primarily taught courses in the Educational Core Studies and Educational Technology and Media subject areas. At that time, the faculty had a population of about 1300 full time and 100 part time students, made up of both undergraduate and graduate students. Around the same time, data collected by the faculty indicated that more than 79% of students identified as female, while only 20% identified as male (Registered Student Report, 2020). The proportion of females enrolled in our faculty was considerably higher than the provincial average, with only about 60% of students enrolled in post-secondary at the time identifying as female (Saskatchewan Post-Secondary Education Indicators, 2020).

University-wide data collected around the same time indicated that the institution as a whole had a population of about 11000 full time and 3000 part time students, of which 14% were international students and 12% identified as First Nations, Métis, or
Inuit (FNMI) (Campus Facts, 2016). While the Faculty of Education does not appear to collect student demographic information in these areas, my personal experience over the past decade of being employed in the faculty leads me to estimate that the proportion of FNMI students was likely even lower than the 12% found across the university as a whole, and that the faculty was (and still is) overwhelmingly White. The predominance of White students in the faculty is in part due to existing partnerships between our faculty and a number of affiliated teacher education programs that are intended primarily for FNMI students.

1.2.2 ECS210: A Brief Overview

In the autumn semester of 2013, Dr. Michael Cappello and I co-taught ECS210 (Curriculum as Cultural and Social Practice), a mandatory curriculum course in our faculty. This course, which students take primarily in either their second or third year of the four-year BEd program, was developed (by Dr. Cappello and Dr. Ken Montgomery among others) as part of the Faculty of Education’s program renewal in 2009; the course is designed as a study of curriculum through the lens of anti-oppressive education. One of the core courses in the Educational Core Studies (ECS) subject area, ECS210 is made up of a weekly large-group lecture (of about one hundred students), co-taught by two primary instructors, as well as a weekly seminar (with a typical enrolment of twenty-five to thirty students), taught either by one of the instructors or by a seminar leader. In the years since ECS210 was developed, Dr. Cappello had been one of the primary instructors of the course for the majority of its iterations. I had been involved with the course as a
seminar leader during two previous semesters and was hired to co-teach the course as a sessional instructor for the first time during the autumn of 2013.

The course focuses heavily on anti-oppressive curriculum and education. Kumashiro’s (2009) work around teaching for social justice provides much of the ontological foundation for the class and has often been used as one of the core texts. As part of the course, students are asked to trouble their “commonsense” (Kumashiro’s term for normative narratives) views of education and to better understand the ways in which their privilege and intersectional positioning affect their understandings of schooling and curriculum; much of the course is centred around what Kumashiro (2009) refers to as “troubling knowledge,” that is, knowledge that causes discomfort, disrupts commonsense ways of viewing the world, and problematizes dominant narratives. For instance, one of the central course assignments in 2013 was an autobiography in which students were asked to consider their identity and the elements that have shaped it. Later in the semester, we returned to this assignment and asked the class to reflect on why, consistently, the vast majority of students did not identify their race, class, gender, etc. as elements that contributed to their identities in order to illustrate the hidden manner in which privilege (and marginalization) shapes our everyday existence.

1.2.3 Going Digital

In the autumn of 2013, Dr. Cappello and I introduced elements of blended learning to the course by adding a digital component to the course environment. Instead of having students hand in paper-based reflective pieces, we required that they post their weekly reflections on personal blogs; while there has always been a reflective component
to the class, and students had had the option to blog their responses in previous semesters, this was the first time we mandated that students post their reflections in a public, online space. Additionally, we created an aggregated blog hub for each of the four seminar sections, so that students, instructors, and members of the public could easily view the collected blog posts for each section. We also introduced a new assignment to the course, in which students were asked to reflect on the contributions that they had made to their classmates’ learning (of note: this assignment was later reimagined as a reflection on the process of building a personal learning network, or PLN).

It bears repeating that the changes to the course were made in light of Dr. Cappello’s and my understandings of both the shifting nature of education and the acknowledgement that pre-service teachers must be prepared to teach and model digital literacies in their future classrooms (Patrick, 2013); asking students to use digital tools to reflect allowed us to support the development of students’ digital literacies in a non-tech focused class. It should also be noted that the newly blended course structure was not unique in our faculty; another colleague, Dr. Alec Couros, had introduced me to the framework of student blog sites coupled with a central hub for the aggregation of student posts, which Dr. Couros used in both his undergraduate and graduate courses related to educational technology, and I had adopted the idea in my own edtech-focussed courses. My own experiences with the format, as well as anecdotal feedback from my students, suggested that the public nature of the blogs played a part in encouraging students to be more thoughtful in their reflections and to provide more support for their ideas; there is also research to suggest that this is the case, with some students noting that blogging led to more meaningful reflection “by providing a space where changes in thinking could be
charted, and by requiring them to think more critically about reading materials and resources” (Sharma & Xie, 2008, p. 143). While these outcomes still appeared to hold true in the case of ECS210, however, the new format of the course also brought with it a host of additional and unexpected complexities, as I discuss below.

1.2.4 Student Responses to the Blended Course Structure

As we transitioned to the blended learning environment in ECS210, it was soon apparent that the nature of student responses to the new format was unique. When introducing blogging in other classes, there are usually a few students who grumble about the prospect of having to share their thoughts publicly. However, it appeared that the content addressed in ECS210 made the experience markedly different; because of the focus on anti-oppressive education and “troubling” knowledge, student reflections on course material have often included expressions of discomfort or of denial and resistance related to students’ feelings of “White guilt” regarding their often troubling learnings about anti-oppressive education. Through informal conversations, I began to get a sense of two key issues (as perceived by my students): first, the more “taboo” content of the reflections led to students being hyper-aware of their online identities for fear of coming across as too political, and second, this difficult content coupled with the online space made students feel like they were being rude or controversial when they were asked to engage critically with peers’ reflections.

More concrete evidence came at the end of the semester, when students blogged
about their contributions to others’ learning and the blogging process more generally.²

One student, for instance, noted:

I hesitated in my posts, as I did not want to say anything the [sic] offended anyone. It is not that I would have been rude when disagreeing with their thoughts, but [...] I did not want to trigger something that they feel strongly about, or maybe something that they had a negative experience with.

Another echoed a similar feeling, writing that if they were to implement blogs in their own classroom, they would “choose a topic that was somewhat controversial but still was safe to discuss.” A third student noted that when it came to commenting on others’ blogs, It isn’t my place to try to push anyone into discussion or reflection that they aren’t comfortable with. Whether it was me being too much of a stranger or the online space being too public (as I know several people expressed discomfort with that) ultimately doesn’t make a difference.

(Interestingly, this student did often push their classmates to think critically about controversial issues both online and in face-to-face settings; this contradiction between their actions and their perceptions of appropriate online etiquette is perhaps indicative of the complexities surrounding the production of identity online.) Student comments consistently demonstrated a hesitance to enter into complicated or uncomfortable conversations in online spaces where the future ramifications of the content posted were unknown and indeed unknowable.

In other cases, however, it appeared that discomforting conversations were

² Quotations from student blog posts are all taken from publicly available blog posts. However, in the interest of confidentiality, I have not included student names, and therefore the posts are not formally cited.
occurring through student blogs. One student wrote the following about her experiences with posting potentially controversial issues on her blog:

What was interesting to me was that it seemed some of my most controversial, or questionable posts were the ones that were commented on. I enjoyed that people took the time to comment on these posts in particular because I feel like these were posts that a bias or belief of mine was clearly being shown, and I may have not ever thought about a different way of seeing it. This is a perfect example of learning through crisis; the first blog that people commented on was one I wrote on the racial profiling activity we did. I wrote how as soon as we learned what we would be doing in this activity that people got all worked up and worried that people in the hallway would hear what we were talking about. I then made the comment that “The fact that I notice someone is black, based on appearance, is not racism. Moving to the other side of the street because they “must be in a gang” because they are black would be racism.” I mentioned how you have to be careful when talking about this subject because it is touchy, but it felt so good to share my thoughts with the class [...]. I think some of [my classmates] were maybe surprised at my honesty. Through posting these slightly controversial thoughts, it helped my classmates to share their opinions as well and put their thoughts and ideas out there.

While this student did still comment on the need to be mindful of what is said online, she clearly stated an appreciation for the blogging platform as a place where her own learning could be troubled, and where she could trouble the learning of others.

As I considered student responses, I was immediately intrigued by the tension and
interplay amongst students’ online selves, the troubling knowledge they were engaging in, and the public nature of the online blog spaces; this was particularly fascinating to me as someone who discussed the topic of digital identity at length in my edtech-focussed classes. I began to wonder: how were the students’ constructions of their digital selves affected by the discomforting knowledge they were openly reflecting upon, and, conversely, how did the online, networked space change or affect the ways in which students were able to reflect upon or engage with each other about the troubling knowledge taken up in the course? Could the public nature of the online spaces be used to disrupt students’ commonsense understandings of discomforting knowledge, or was the blogging format merely encouraging students to simply repeat and reinscribe their commonsense understandings in order to err on the side of “political correctness?”

In a preliminary interview with a former ECS210 student, I asked about the ways in which online spaces made it easier or more difficult to question others’ oppressive beliefs. Her response was, in many ways, telling of the particular affordances and difficulties inherent in online spaces that I had begun to notice: she noted that it was easy for her to challenge a comment that, for instance, negated White privilege, by directing the commenter to a Tim Wise video or other link. She noted that she would be more hesitant to do so in person, because online it was easier to avoid the person’s immediate defensive reaction; the asynchronous nature of much online communication allowed for that bit of space to be non-confrontational. But when I asked whether she often got replies to such interactions, she said no - that same space which allowed her to confront others online also made it easier for others to ignore challenges to their beliefs.
1.3 Positioning Myself in the Research

A final piece of the puzzle leading to my research questions is the examination of my own background and positioning as it relates to my research. Madison (2012) stresses the importance of positionality in qualitative research, including the importance of teasing out the ways in which our relationships to others affect the research. Moreover, we must explicitly address our own ontological commitments, asking “to what extent are we employing certain regimes of knowledge, and who or what is being heard or silenced?” (p. 111). Dutta (2014) notes that “researchers...bring their own worldviews and biographies to their research endeavours. As researchers, we are located at the intersection of particular socio-political milieu, culture, and history” (p. 93). Thus, below I briefly explore “the explication of the horizon in which we stand as researchers, [which] compels us to engage with our own power, privilege, and life histories” (Dutta, 2014, p. 93), as well as how these elements contributed to the development of my research focus.

First, I should note that I am positioned as a teacher/instructor, and one who is White, cisgender female, and middle-class. Such categories are deeply important to the ways in which I am produced as a subject, the ways in which I interact with students, and the ways in which I am able to present materials and students are able to take those materials up. For instance, my experiences teaching in this faculty (along with what I have heard from other faculty members and instructors) have made it clear that while I, as a White instructor, do frequently face resistance when addressing topics such as race and White supremacy with students, my BIPOC colleagues encounter much greater opposition when doing so. Thus, my ability to speak to students about their experiences engaging with social justice issues online is in large part a privilege afforded to me
because of my own Whiteness. Additionally, these identity categories are important to the ways in which I am able to present myself and interact with others in online spaces. Thus, given that many of the students in our faculty share a number of these identity categories with me, my own experiences online contributed to my interest in learning about, and addressing, the ways in which my students experienced these same spaces.

Additionally, I am positioned as both a graduate student and sessional instructor. In the former role, I am afforded limited power. I am positioned as a learner, near the bottom of the hierarchical academy, hoping to move upwards. As a sessional instructor, however, I am expected by students to be an expert in my field, a deliverer of content knowledge, and a guide of their learning. I am positioned in a liminal space of sorts, somewhere between student and professor, amateur and expert. As such, I sometimes feel a tension when presenting myself in public spaces, including networked, online spaces such as Twitter. This negotiation and fragmentation of identity emerges in other positions situated on the periphery of academia; indeed, Pryal (2014) writes about her “bifurcated” identity as a freelance academic.

Given this liminal positioning, as noted above I have frequently experienced tension with respect to presenting myself in networked spaces. I joined Twitter in January of 2013 after many months of deliberation. I was hesitant to put my thoughts online; I worried about saying the “right” thing or about offending someone. For several months, I “lurked” on Twitter, watching but not contributing. Rafaeli et al. (2004) note that lurkers in online spaces “do have opinions, ideas and information of value to the community. Some are just waiting for the right moment to contribute, either because of their character or because of the community atmosphere” (p. 2); this tension of waiting for just the right
moment encapsulates my own initial reticence to speak up and share. After witnessing my students as they demonstrated a similar fear and tension, I began to wonder: How have I, positioned as both graduate student and sessional instructor, and indeed, as a White middle-class female, been schooled and discursively produced — by the discourse of the good student, the good teacher, the good citizen — to present a particular, inoffensive, “neutral” version of myself to the public? And indeed, if I am hesitant to act in ways that push the boundaries of these discourses, how might my students, afforded even less power in academic spaces, be similarly produced and/or silenced as particular types of subjects? Ultimately, these questions, and the context described above, all led to the conceptualization of my research focus.

1.4 Developing Research Questions

Anti-oppressive education is difficult enough in face-to-face settings; it is the work of a lifetime, so that, to paraphrase Kumashiro (2009), we never are anti-oppressive educators, but rather, we are always becoming. However, as our lives become increasingly enmeshed with the online world, digital spaces present a new and important realm in which to grapple with social justice. Moreover, these spaces are incredibly complex. On the one hand, the spaces are cultures of their own, with particular rules and norms for interaction; on the other hand, though, just like face-to-face contexts, the online world “comes laden with the baggage of cultural and social norms,” including issues such as racism (Petray & Collin, 2017, p. 1). Therefore, they likely present new challenges for anti-oppressive education, at the same time as they may offer new possibilities. With the increasing focus on digital citizenship and digital literacies in schools, it will be even
more important for teachers to model positive digital identities for their students; however, without an understanding of the intersection of digital identity formation and anti-oppressive education, we run the risk that the teachers’ online selves, saturated as they are in the neo-liberal discourse of the “good teacher,” will be counter-productive to the aims of social justice, reinscribing discourses that privilege and marginalize through what they promote or what they silence. Moreover, given that our faculty (along with those at many other institutions of higher education) is moving towards more online course offerings, it is critical to understand the unique characteristics of digital spaces (and, concomitantly, the identities/subjectivities that these technical environs make possible) to best utilize their benefits and avoid their drawbacks.

Given the complexities of digital identity formation both in general and for pre-service teachers in particular, it is important to justify asking students to engage in online identity work, especially in the context of troubling knowledge, as is the case in my research. On a basic level, helping future teachers to become competent and informed citizens of the digital world and to develop a positive digital presence is critical to permit them to model these skills for their students, especially as such skills become part of the curriculum. Indeed, a plethora of research suggests that so-called twenty-first century skills will be increasingly important for students’ success in work and life (see, for instance, Conner, 2012; NETS for Students, 2012; Jenkins, 2006). Moreover, if networks are indeed reputational economies, then teachers’ digital identities are especially important as they will afford them the legitimacy needed to connect with other teachers and other classrooms worldwide in order to learn and collaborate in our global culture.
In the context of my research, however, it is also important to think about the ways in which digital identities and networked spaces can be utilized to aid in the work of anti-oppressive education. This is perhaps not directly a rationale for asking pre-service teachers to engage with troubling knowledge in online spaces. However, with the knowledge that young people are active users of the Internet, we can safely assume that our students are as well, and will increasingly be in the future. Hence, when pre-service teachers communicate and share in networked spaces but are not actively working to promote anti-oppressive aims, one might argue that through their silence, they are being complicit to the racist or otherwise oppressive statements and “truths” that circulate online; like Kumashiro’s (2009) null curriculum, those things that we do not say can speak just as loudly as those we do. As more and more of our lives are lived online, it is crucial that we help students think about the ways in which their digital identities can be used in productive ways to break down and disrupt dominant and oppressive discourses. We must critically examine the question: how does our performance of identity online, and the way that we perceive digital identity, intersect with our ability to take up the work of social justice and anti-oppressive education in online spaces?

Carr (2016) identifies the crux of the issue:

As education stretches past and beyond the boundaries of educational institutions, it is fundamental to understand what informs educational policy, its implications, the hidden curriculum, and the process of developing and implementing curriculum. What are the messages that students, educators and others receive, formulate, understand, and engage with in formal and public schooling? How do social media, reality shows, normative television, news reporting, and other broad
based, mainstream trends affect what we know, what we do, and what happens in schools? (p. 63)

Essentially, the issue is this: As educators develop more and more hybrid identities, what will our collective digital presence say about our beliefs and values?

In light of this pressing challenge, as well as the context outlined above, my research questions took shape. The primary goal of my research was to better understand the ways in which students negotiated the complexities of reflecting on troubling knowledge in open, networked spaces. More specifically, in approaching the research from a critical post-structural framework, I was particularly interested in the discourses surrounding the production of teachers’ (digital) identity and how these discourses came to bear on the ways in which my students approached the “controversial” topics in online spaces. Ultimately, my aim was to use these understandings to explore how we might better support students in engaging with anti-oppressive education online. In light of this context, my research questions emerged:

- **Question 1:** How do pre-service teachers understand the process of engaging with discomforting knowledge and “controversial” social justice-related topics in open, online spaces, and what are the perceived barriers to engaging with these issues via digital media?

- **Question 2:** How do dominant discourses around teaching, digital spaces, and identity, as well as the discursive production of pre-service teachers, contribute to perceived barriers to engaging with social justice-related topics in open, online spaces?
Question 3: How might we better support students in becoming active anti-oppressive educators online?

Note that my use of the term “controversial” is taken from students’ frequent use of the term to describe social justice-related topics such as racism and White privilege. While this term might also refer to topics like sexism, homophobia, or classism, the focus in this dissertation is on the former topics.

In Chapter 2, I outline the theoretical understandings that form the worldview through which I viewed and conducted this research. However, at this point it is helpful to understand the basic ontological premises upon which this work is based, namely the following:

- The way in which we perceive the world is shaped by the dominant discourses in society; in the context of this dissertation, these discourses privilege a Eurocentric, White, Christian, heteronormative, paternalistic worldview.
- Identity (or subjecthood) is not fixed or innate; rather, our understanding of our self (and by extension, the world) is constructed through discourse.
- Despite this, the modernist discourse of the rational and fixed subject remains the dominant understanding of personhood in our society.

These ontological touchstones helped to guide my understanding of the research question and process.

In this chapter, I have introduced the context of my doctoral research and laid out my aims in undertaking this study. In the chapters that follow, I describe the methodological approach, theoretical framework, and overall process of the research (Chapter 2), provide an overview of the relevant literature (Chapter 3), describe the
processes of data collection (Chapter 4), and then provide an overview of my results (Chapters 5-7).
Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework, Methodology, and Methods

In this chapter, I outline the methodology and methods that I ultimately chose to employ in my research, as well as the particular strategies and techniques used for everything from participant selection to data generation and analysis. However, before discussing methodology and methods, I feel it is important to delineate an ontological foundation for my research by describing the theoretical framework and perspectives that underpin this work.

2.1 Theoretical Understandings

In approaching this research (and the world in general), I have taken up a critical post-structural ontological framework. In particular, my understandings of digital identity and of the ways in which my students are able to conceive of themselves as (anti-oppressive) educators in online spaces are rooted in a view of self and subjecthood as discursively produced, while my practice as an educator is rooted in the ideas of critical pedagogy. Below, I outline both the post-structural and critical lenses and describe how these two ontological frameworks work together to support and inform my research.

2.1.1 Post-structuralism: A Brief Introduction

Post-structuralism is a philosophical, critical, and intellectual movement (or, perhaps more accurately, a collection of such movements) that arose as a response to the earlier structuralist movement, which was based, very generally, on the belief that there are unseen structures which underpin society and culture (Harmon & Holman, 2003; Peters & Burbules, 2004). It is perhaps impossible to provide a singular definition of
post-structuralism, as even the term itself is often contentious; however, the many thinkers who fall under the heading might be loosely grouped in their theorizing of the ways in which meaning and truth are constructed. Foucault, upon whose work I draw heavily here, argues, for instance, that truth and knowledge, and therefore, in turn, the subject, are the products of discourse: what is taken as “fact” is historically and contextually contingent (Peters & Burbules, 2004). Additionally, Derrida (1978), whose work is sometimes considered the exemplar of post-structural thought, famously critiques structuralism’s belief in an underlying structure and the idea of a centre; rather, he sees meaning as produced through “a series of substitutions of center for center” (p. 179), with each signifier differing and deferring (from) the next (in French, Derrida uses the term différance, which implies both of these meanings) in what Lacan, another post-structural thinker, might call a chain of signifiers (Henriques et al., 1998). Thus, some of the major contentions of post-structuralism are: that meaning is not fixed but is rather constructed in accordance with a historically specific context; that meaning is conferred based on difference (that is, on what we are not); that truth is never universal; and finally that such a construction of meaning and truth leads to the impossibility of an accessible and autonomous conscious mind.

I acknowledge that these elements of post-structuralism make up only a tiny portion of the broader theory; however, it is not my intent to give an overview of the entire field. For the purposes of this dissertation, I focus primarily on a Foucauldian post-structuralism, with an emphasis on Foucault’s conceptions of the subject, discourse, and power/knowledge. In order to understand these topics in context, it is helpful to begin by briefly exploring the modernist theories of the individual against which post-structuralism
is positioned. Indeed, Henriques et al. (1998) have noted that even the idea of an “individual” has been produced discursively, and thus it is important to understand the modernist notion of individuality in order to deconstruct it so as to understand its effects.

### 2.1.2 Modernist Theories of the Individual

A modernist ontology is based in a particular conception of the subject, which stems, ultimately, from the Cartesian emphasis on reason and the notion of the cogito (that is, we are human because of our capacity for rational thought). In such a worldview, the humanist subject is seen as an agentic producer of knowledge and change; moreover, they have a fixed, unitary pre-given self or core identity that is essentially unchangeable (Henriques et al., 1998; Venn, 1998). They are “conscious, stable, unified, rational, coherent, knowing, autonomous, and ahistorical. . . [with a] singular, unified, and atomic core” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 500). In addition, the humanist view of the subject is organized around binary oppositions, so that the “fundamental opposition of self/other, subject/object, and identity/difference” becomes critical to the core identity that an individual possesses (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 500). The foundational nature of these binaries in modernist thought leaves little room for identities that shift or that fall somewhere in the midst of an opposing pair, so that we are either male or female, White or Black, good or bad; moreover, implicit in these binary categories is a value judgment, where one member of the pair is dominant and the other is marginalized.

Even prior to post-structuralism’s reimagining of the self and subjectivity, the modernist conception of identity was critiqued on a number of fronts. For instance, the

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3 I use “they / their / them” in this dissertation rather than “S/he / his/her / him/her” as a means of disrupting the gender binary.
view of identity as fixed and pre-given presents an issue for theories of the self that investigate the ways in which the social plays a part in identity-formation. However, Henriques et al. (1998) note that many groups intent on theorizing the effect of the social become caught up in the individual-society dualism and the quest to understand which comes first, so to speak; such theories almost always ultimately turn to the pre-given, fundamental subject, which then puts emphasis on innate characteristics of the “individual” and denies any real effects of the social.

St. Pierre (2000) notes that the modernist view of the self is also critiqued by Marxism (on the grounds that individuals cannot exist apart from social structures and historical ideologies) and by psychoanalysis (based on the centrality in that theory of the unconscious mind, which contradicts the idea of a fully rational subject). Lacan further problematizes the rational individual of humanist thought by “theorizing a subject that is produced and split as it enters language, in effect, a subject that is constituted in language” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 501). These various critiques of the modernist individual set the stage for a new interpretation of identity formation.

In the last decades of the 20th century, then, there is a shift to a more post-structural theory of identity. Specifically, Althusser’s theory of interpellulation or hailing (essentially, the naming of a subject) focuses on the importance of the subject being recognized by dominant, legitimized social forces: “According to Althusser, subjects are constructed as they are recruited by the dominant ideology to be used and inserted into the social economy” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 502). Of note: in Althusser’s theory, the interpellation of a subject and ideology are the same thing; thus, he argues that “‘individuals are always-already subject’ . . . even before they are born, since they are
born into ideology” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 502). In Althusser’s theory, we see a movement away from the concern with the individual-social binary, replaced by the recognition that such a distinction is, in fact, moot and unnecessary; what is more important is an interrogation of the interplay between the multiple sites of identity and the ways in which Althusser’s ideology (which shares many similarities to Foucault’s discourse) are inextricably bound up in the formation of the subject from the very start.

2.1.3 From Fixed to Fluid: Post-Structuralism and the Subject

While the modernist individual possessed a fixed, core identity and was a “self-centred, constitutive agent of its history and of history generally” (Henriques et al., 1998, p. xii), a post-structural understanding of the subject, and a Foucauldian one in particular, deconstructs this commonsense view and re-imagines the subject as discursively and continually constituted and re-constituted, always already historically specified and bound up in the interplay of power and knowledge (Henriques et al., 1998; Foucault, 1980a). It is important to note that a post-structural understanding of the subject, however, presents a major disruption to commonsense ways of knowing: Henriques, et al. (1998) have noted that “identity as a malleable commodity, or as something that is not naturally determined and fixed, has far reaching implications for the way we understand the relation between nature and culture” and indeed, the world in general (p. xv). Such a re-imagining first requires us to rethink certain modernist assumptions about the way the world functions; indeed, Henriques et al. (1998) argue that Foucault’s approach helps “deconstruct the monolithic, unitary character of power and the social domain,” allowing us, in turn, to conceptualize a non-unitary subject (p. 92). Consequently, I turn here to an
exploration of Foucauldian/post-structural understandings of power, knowledge, and language, before returning to a more specific description of the subject itself.

2.1.4 Power

A modernist ontology perceives power as a top-down, repressive entity that acts primarily to punish and control through force. In such an understanding, which aligns itself naturally with the structure of feudal societies, power is wielded by the few over the many. With the advent of the industrial revolution, however, Foucault traces the invention of a new type of power, one that functions in quieter, less obvious ways. In its new incarnation, power is never top-down; instead, it is everywhere, acting in a capillary function, spread throughout the social system and operating in all directions at once, so that every subject (that is, every person) is constantly both exercising and being acted upon by power (Foucault, 1980a; Foucault, 1980b). Nor is power exterior to the subject; rather we are all “vehicles of power” (Foucault, 1980b, p. 98), so that “power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives,” working from within rather than above the body, although Foucault does note that this does not imply that power is equally distributed (Foucault, 1980a, p. 39).

In order to illustrate how power acts as a means of exerting control in invisible ways, Foucault uses the image of the Panopticon: conceived by Jeremy Bentham, the Panopticon is a circular prison with a tower in the centre; the cells of the prison are arranged along the walls of the outer circle, with windows that face into the centre so as to allow (in theory) for the constant observation of all inmates from the central tower.
What is particularly interesting about the Panopticon is that the figure in the centre becomes unimportant: what matters is not that the inmate is actually being watched, but that they are aware of being constantly visible (Foucault, 1979). In this way, maintaining a level of constant surveillance does not require cruel or costly exercises of power; ultimately, because the individual knows of the potential for observation, “each individual thus exercis[es] this surveillance over, and against, himself” (Foucault, 1980c, p. 155). Foucault refers to this learned self-surveillance as governmentality (Peters & Burbules, 2004); importantly, Foucault extends this idea of self-surveillance beyond the prison and argues that one of the prime sites in which self-government is taught and learned is the school, where teachers exercise what Boler (1999) refers to as pastoral power in order to instill the desired behaviours in students (Foucault, 1979; Peters & Burbules, 2004).

In Foucault’s understanding of the Panopticon, however, power acts in other ways as well: “In the Panopticon each person, depending on his place, is watched by all or certain of the others” (Foucault, 1980c, p. 158). Thus, just as the technologies of power lead to self-surveillance, Foucault argues that these same mechanisms lead to our surveillance of each other so that “‘each comrade becomes an overseer’” of everyone else, since the invisible functioning of power makes it impossible to know just when we are being observed and surveilled (Foucault, 1980c, p. 152). Given a Foucauldian conception of power, the identity of the observer in the central tower becomes not a single individual but rather anyone and everyone. Thus, the Panopticon becomes “a transparent building in which the exercise of power may be supervised by society as a whole” (Foucault, 1979, p. 207), so that everyone is both trapped by and given the right
to exercise the function of power. Thus, we are left ultimately with a complex system of networked power in which we are all implicated.

Foucault (1990) notes, importantly, that this pervasive, ubiquitous functioning of power is in fact part of what makes it successful: he notes that “power is tolerable only on condition that it mask a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms” (p. 86). This characteristic is potentially troubling, however: power’s ability to mask its own functioning allows it to be normalized and unquestioned, making it difficult to deconstruct its sometimes adverse effects.

A second key characteristic that arises out of a Foucauldian understanding of power is that it is productive: Foucault (1979) argues that “we must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it ‘excludes,’ it ‘represses,’ it ‘censors,’ it ‘abstracts,’ it ‘masks,’ it ‘conceals.’ In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him [sic] belong to this production” (p. 194). He notes additionally that power is obeyed because of the very fact that it is productive rather than repressive (Foucault, 1980d); just as its hidden functioning makes it easier to ignore and obey, so too does the fact that it does not function in a cruel or foreboding manner.

2.1.5 Power/Knowledge: The Production of “Truth”

As noted above, Foucault argues that power is productive, not repressive; in fact, he notes that it produces truth, reality, and the subject, and I deal with each of these three productions in turn. First, through its interplay with knowledge, power is productive in shaping what counts as truth. That is, Foucault (1980a) notes that power and knowledge
are inextricably linked, so that power creates knowledge and knowledge creates power: “the exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and, conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power” (p. 52), so that what counts as truth becomes institutionalized by the operations of power. Thus, in post-structural theorizing, knowledge is not based in unchanging “truth” or “facts” but is instead determined and disseminated by the social body, and specifically by social institutions (schools, governments, etc.) and their subjects (Foucault, 1980d). Thus, Apple (2000) argues, knowledge is never neutral; what counts as legitimate knowledge is the result of complex power relations and struggles among identifiable class, race, gender, and religious groups” (p. 180). Additionally, Foucault (1980e) notes that every society has a particular “régime of truth,” that is, a regime which designates those things that are sayable as true and which marks those individuals who are permitted to determine truth (p. 131). Here, then, lies an important point: while Foucault sees power as capillary, operating in all directions from subjects’ bodies, this does not imply equality among subjects, nor does it imply a sort of rampant relativism in which anything might be equally legitimate (a criticism that is often levelled at post-structuralism). Instead, the ways in which power functions and the knowledge that it creates are always embedded in historicity, serving the dominant social order; Foucault (1980b) notes that only “certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, certain desires, come to be identified and constituted as individuals” through the mechanisms of power (p. 98). But just as power acts in unseen ways, so too does the production of “truth” and “legitimate knowledge” work to make said production invisible, so that the constructed reality appears normalized and natural.
Hence, I turn now to the topic of discourse, which is the vehicle through which this reality is produced and re-produced.

2.1.6 Discourse: The Production of “Reality”

The word discourse is sometimes conceived narrowly to include only language, but in a Foucauldian post-structuralism, the term expands into something much broader. Discourse is a vehicle of power: it “transmits and produces power; it reinforces it” (Foucault, 1990, p. 101). Moreover, discourse shapes the way we are able to think and speak about the world; it renders certain things unsayable at the same time as it normalized other things to the point that they seem to be natural and innate (Henriques et al., 1998). Indeed, Walkerdine (1998) notes that “particular disciplines, regimes of truth, bodies of knowledge, make possible both what can be said and what can be done” (p. 154-55), so that, for instance, an educational climate that is steeped in rigid theories of child development will produce students who are normalized or set apart by their adherence to this discourse, not through any intentional act of malice on the teacher’s part but because it is difficult to act in ways that go against the dominant discourse. Indeed, this is the ingenious power of discursive production: discourses become so ingrained that we no longer recognize them as a production at all. Rather, they become what Kumashiro (2009) refers to as “commonsense,” or what we might term normative narratives: stories we have told ourselves and each other for so long that we find it almost impossible to stop believing them, because they have come to define who we are.

Discourses act in normative ways to construct particular versions of reality. For instance, discourse dictates, even before birth, what it means to be a girl or a boy, what it
means to be rich or poor, or what it means to be racialized in a particular way. In *The History of Sexuality*, for instance, Foucault (1990) traces the ways in which a particular way of speaking and thinking about sexuality came to be in the Victorian era, noting that even the layout of houses, with the advent of a separate room for the parents, contributed to the construction of sex and sexuality as something secret and taboo by normalizing its separation. Additionally, discourse acts through binaries, constructing the self in relation to the imagined other, so that, for instance, the sane individual is defined only in opposition to madness, and vice versa (Venn, 1998). In this way, discourses serve the dominant group and reinforce systems of hegemony, privileging some and marginalizing others: “Privilege and position at centre is dependent upon the subjection and marginalization of the Other” (Graham & Slee, 2008, p. 284).

Just as Althusser argued that subjects were *always-already* interpellated by dominant ideologies, a post-structural understanding sees discourse as ever present. Foucault (1980e) notes that nothing is outside of discourse and that power and discourse are “always already there” (p. 141) (although, as I argue later, this does not preclude individual agency). Indeed, even our desires to take up particular discourses are not pre-given but are themselves discursively produced: LeCourt (2004), citing MacDonald, argues that desire is “the socially and historically embedded way in which sensuous beings [i.e. bodies] strive to make their world” (p. 74). In addition, we desire to take up particular discursively produced subject positions in part because of the agency that they bestow on the subject.

As is evident in the example above regarding Foucault’s (1990) deconstruction of the way spaces contribute to discourse, discursive production occurs in multiple sites.
Language, however, is a particularly productive vehicle for discourse, and therefore I turn to Butler, who writes extensively on this matter. Butler (1997) argues that we must be fundamentally linguistic beings because of language’s capacity to injure us. Indeed, she notes that language (like discourse), is always already present and central to our constitution, so that, in fact, even the ways in which we are able to speak about language are bound up in its prior formation of us as speaking subjects. Like power and knowledge, discourse and the language used to transmit it are always bound and shaped by their historical moment, so that in every utterance,

certain conventions are invoked at the moment of utterance. . . .To the extent that the moment is ritual, it is never merely a single moment. The ‘moment’ in a ritual is a condensed historicity: it exceeds itself in past and future directions, an effect of prior and future invocations that constitute and escape the instance of utterance. (Butler, 1997, p. 3)

Thus, what we are able to say is delineated by the discourses that are at play in a particular moment - that is, those discourses that presently best serve the dominant groups.

2.1.7 Subjectivity/Subjectivation: The Production of the Subject

Taken together, then, all of these elements (that is, power, knowledge, discourse, and language) of a post-structural, Foucauldian ontology are essential to the production of the subject; it is this production to which I now turn. Both the terms subjectivity and subjectivation (and indeed, occasionally, subjection) are used in post-structural theorizing to denote the production of the subject. Henriques et al. (1998) define subjectivity as
referring to “individuality and self-awareness - the condition of being a subject - [but also, in relation to discourse] - the condition of being subject” (p. 3, emphasis added). This dual meaning - of subjectivity as both constituting and constraining - is central to a post-structural understanding of the subject. That is, in the moment that we are recognized discursively as subjects - as women, or as White, or as teachers - we also become the subject of that particular discourse, which constrains the possibilities for the ways in which we can speak, think, and act. Pacini-Ketchabaw et al. (2010) illustrate this so-called “double move in the construction of subjectivity” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 502): they discuss the ways in which youth care workers “simultaneously master and become mastered by developmental theories,” exploring the ways in which “child development discourses operate in complex, paradoxical, and contradictory ways as a ‘regime of truth’ in everyday practice” (Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2010, p. 336). The authors note that while theories of child development have been problematized and shown to be limiting to children, the youth care workers’ knowledge of these issues is in tension with their desire to master the discourse in which they are positioned.

St. Pierre (2000) notes that “subjectivity is produced socially, through language and relations. . . . The subject does not exist ahead of or outside of language, but is a dynamic, unstable effect of the language/discourse and cultural practice” (p. 502). Subjectivation, then, occurs through the mechanisms of several intersecting technologies (that is, means or methods of production); these include technologies of power and knowledge, technologies of language/discourse, and technologies of the self (LeCourt, 2004). Importantly, the interplay of these technologies is constantly shifting, and thus, identity is never fixed and always includes the potential for shifts and ruptures.
As noted above, multiple technologies are involved in the construction of subjects. For instance, Foucault (1979) notes that the technologies of power are used to discipline bodies so that they become “docile.” As we saw earlier, power’s covert functioning allows it to operate unseen, so that at the same time as bodies are disciplined through surveillance and social institutions such as the school, they simultaneously buy into the dominant modernist discourse of the unitary, free-thinking subject who is the maker of change; thus, the subject is unaware of their own subjectification.

Normative discourses, which are produced through the power-knowledge relation, are another productive technology, so that discourse “categorizes the individual, marks him [sic] by his [sic] own individuality, attaches to him his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him that he must recognize and others have to recognize in him” (Foucault, 1983, p. 214). Indeed, as noted, subjects are produced to desire the very categories of discourse that then constrain their identities.

Additionally, Butler (1997) identifies language as a productive technology: “Being called a name is . . . one of the conditions by which a subject is constituted through language” (p. 5). She notes that in order to constitute the self, we require the “address of the Other” (p. 5), that is, to become subjectivated, we must be recognized by another who has already become a subject.

The production of the subject, however, is not one-sided - rather it is a dialogic process in which neither individual nor society is primary (Henriques et al., 1998). Just as discourse, power, and other elements of the social need a body from within which to act (that is, to function as a vehicle for power and discourse), the body requires discourse to be constituted. Butler (1997) argues that it is impossible to imagine:
a body that has not yet been given social definition, a body that is, strictly speaking, not accessible to us, that nevertheless becomes accessible on the occasion of an address, a call, an interpellation that does not ‘discover’ this body, but constitutes it fundamentally. . . . We may think that to be addressed one must first be recognized, but . . . the address constitutes a being within the possible circuit of recognition and, accordingly, outside of it, in abjection. (p. 5)

The two entities, then, rather than representing a dichotomy, are bound up in each other’s constitution.

2.1.8. Agency

Given a post-structural understanding of the subject, it may be tempting to assume that subjectivation results in a loss of agency; however, this is not the case. On the subject of agency, Foucault (1990) notes that “Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (p. 95). Moreover, while nothing is outside of discourse, there are still multiple discourses at play in any given situation; thus, we can choose to understand our actions with reference to a variety of discourses (provided that we are aware of these multiple discourses), meaning that we are not entirely constrained by our discursive positioning (Henriques et al, 1998).

Perhaps more importantly, however, the double play of subjectivation, in which the subject is simultaneously constituted and constrained, has implicit in its function the conferral of an agency of sorts. Indeed, while Butler (1997) argues that we are constituted through the act of being called a name, “one is also, paradoxically, given a certain
possibility for social existence, initiated into a temporal life of language that exceeds the prior purposes that animate that call” (p. 2). That is, being named oneself confers with it the possibility of naming others, and with this possibility comes the potential to enact discourse in ways that subvert it.

Butler (1997) argues that there is always the possibility for speech acts to be insurrectionary. Indeed, because of the fundamental disconnect between signified and signifier and the way in which meaning is produced through a Lacanian chain of differing signifiers, even words that have been normalized to injure have the potential to be taken up in different ways. Here, Butler gives the example of the LGBTQ community’s revisioning of the word “queer,” or even (but certainly more problematically) the reclamation of the “N” word in Black culture. Who speaks, and what power they have to speak, is fundamental in the interpretation of discourse, and even small re-interpretations of words can lead to change: “That moment in which a speech act without prior authorization nevertheless assumes authorization in the course of its performance may anticipate and instate altered contexts for its future reception” (p. 161). What becomes important is the ability to recognize normative discourses so that we can begin to deconstruct and reconstruct them.

Having laid a foundational understanding of post-structuralism and the post-structural subject, I turn now to the layering of a critical lens atop this post-structural foundation.
2.1.9 Adding a Critical Lens

While he primarily discusses critical ethnography, Carspecken (1996) spends a great deal of time delineating the critical branch of qualitative research. He notes that critical theorists share particular value orientations, including a focus on addressing, rather than merely defining, social inequalities and oppressive power structures. Carspecken also writes that a critical epistemology begins in a pragmatist framework, which argues for the existence of a “real” world. Candlin (2010) adds, “Critical after all is not just even primarily, criticism . . .; it is primarily . . . a seeking of the means of explaining data in the context of social and political and institutional analysis” (p. ix). Speaking in the context of critical pedagogy and critical theory in education, Kincheloe and McLaren (1994) add the following:

We are defining a criticalist as a researcher or theorist who attempts to use her or his work as a form of social or cultural criticism and who accepts certain basic assumptions: that all thought is fundamentally mediated by power relations which are socially and historically constituted; that facts can never be isolated from the domain of values or removed from some form of ideological inscription; that the relationship between concept and object and signifier and signified is never stable or fixed and is often mediated by the social relations of capitalist production and consumption; that language is central to the formation of subjectivity (conscious and unconscious awareness); that certain groups in any society are privileged over others and, although the reasons for this privileging may vary widely, the oppression which characterizes contemporary societies is most forcefully reproduced when subordinates accept their social status as natural, necessary or
inevitable; that oppression has many faces and that focusing on only one at the expense of others (e.g. class oppression versus racism) often elides the interconnections among them; and finally, that mainstream research practices are generally, although most often unwittingly, implicated in the reproduction of systems of class, race and gender oppression. (p. 139-140)

While Kincheloe and McLaren’s definition is a lengthy one, it is helpful to understand the key features of a critical lens. Importantly, the overview of criticalism provided by Kincheloe and McLaren (1994) demonstrates that there are many intersecting elements between a critical lens and a post-structural one, especially with regard to the importance of power, the relationship between power and knowledge, and the centrality (and slipperiness) of language in the production of the subject. However, a major incompatibility appears to exist in the underlying ontologies of the two lenses, with critical theory based in realism and post-structuralism often seen as founded in relativism. Specifically, a critical framework takes up a position of critical realism, which rests on the assumptions that beneath the surface appearance are “ideas, norms, and ideologies [that] create meanings for constructing social subjects and concepts like ‘gender,’ ‘race,’ and ‘student’” in ways that lead to privilege and marginalization (p. 34). At first glance, although the language is slightly different, such an argument does not seem incompatible with a Foucauldian understanding of the hidden effects of power; however, it is important to keep in mind that critical realism still rests on the belief that there exists some underlying “reality” to be uncovered, while a post-structural theorizing rejects the idea of some pre-given material reality that exists prior to discursive constructions.
As well, another potential point of tension involves the stated purpose of unpacking the power structures that shape our reality. For criticalists to aim towards a better society through emancipatory research, there is the necessary implication of a value judgment, that is, that some ideal culture and discourse does exist. Fairclough (2010) provides the following explanation:

Critique . . . focuses on what is wrong with a society (an institution, an organisation etc.), and how ‘wrongs’ might be ‘righted’ or mitigated, from a particular normative standpoint. Critique is grounded in values, in particular views of the ‘good society’ and of human well-being and flourishing, on the basis of which it evaluates existing societies and possible ways of changing them. For instance, many people (though not all) would agree that societies ought to be just or fair, ought to ensure certain freedoms, and ought to provide for certain basic needs of their members (for food, shelter, healthcare etc.). The devil of course is in the detail: people have very different ideas of justice, freedom and need, and critical social research is necessarily involved in debates over the meaning of these and other value-related concepts. (p. 7)

In essence, then, a critical lens rests on the belief that there is an eventual end point to strive for, a better world to work towards. It aims not merely to deconstruct the power relations and social structure that are built through discourse, but also to improve them towards a collective good.

Such a belief is obviously problematic if we see post-structuralism as being entirely relativistic. In a closer reading of many of the theorists who work in these areas, however, it becomes apparent that such narrow views of both fields are unhelpful and
unwarranted, allowing for a potential point of intersection. For instance, while Tamboukou and Ball (2003) note that the issue of relativism is a sticking point between a critical and post-structural lens, they argue that Foucault himself recognizes that power is unequally distributed. They note, as well, that resistance, in a post-structural sense, may be more about questioning and interrogating the workings of power, rather than “replacing those who hold power with a previously oppressed group” (p. 9). Indeed, at several points, Foucault sets himself apart from a relativistic view of post-structuralism; for instance, he remarks:

My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. So my position leads not to apathy but to a hyper- and pessimistic activism … the ethico-political choice we have to make … is to determine which is the main danger. (Foucault, 1983, p. 256)

Taken together with the always constrained but still available agency that is inherent in post-structuralism’s subjectivation, it is apparent that post-structuralism is not as incompatible with emancipatory aims as might initially be assumed.

Lather (2001) and others differentiate between ludic and resistance post-modernism⁴, where the former is focused on relativism and “the playfulness of the signifier” (p. 479) and the latter offers possibilities for emancipatory democracy. Lather (1991) notes that the marriage of critical theory and post perspectives stems from a growing number of scholars who are “committed to emancipatory discourse and

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⁴ For our purposes, Lather’s post-modernism may largely be taken here as synonymous with post-structuralism; the two terms are related in many ways but are often differentiated based on the schools of thought to which they place themselves in opposition (modernism and structuralism, respectively) and the areas of study to which they are generally applied (c.f. Peters & Burbules, 2004).
modernist strategies [but] are yet engaged by post-modernism to try to use it in the interests of emancipation” (p. 1-2). Lather (2001) notes, importantly, that post-structuralism “is about complicating reference, not denying it, through a profound vigilance regarding how language does its work” (p. 479); thus, instead of offering up a different worldview, post-structuralism asks us to question and deconstruct existing ones. Carspecken (1996) rightly points out the incompatibility of a critical framework with ludic post-modernism - in a world of total relativism, any aim of helping particular oppressed groups holds a great deal less meaning.

The use of a post-critical lens underscores the overarching focus on the discursive forces that produce pre-service teachers in certain ways, especially in relation to elements of identity such as race, class, and gender. Agar (1996) notes that a critical lens asks:

*Why* are things this way? What power, what interests, wrap this local world so tight that it feels like the natural order of things to its inhabitants? Are those inhabitants even aware of those interests, aware that they have alternatives? . . . maybe . . . the ethnographer should show them choices they don’t even know they have. (p. 26)

Although critical and post perspectives are perhaps difficult to reconcile on certain epistemological grounds, Agar’s perspective above provides evidence that they both share a common understanding of the pervasive and silent ways in which discourse operates in society. In my own research, then, I take up a resistance post-modernist/post-structuralist, critical ontology, keeping in mind Foucault’s goal of a vigilant activism that constantly seeks out the main danger. I name this work “post-critical,” taking up the term used by Lather (2001) and Noblit et al. (2004) to describe this interplay of critical theory
with a resistance post-modernism. Lather (2001) notes that the philosopher John Caputo prefers the term post-critical because it implies “a continued commitment to critique and demystification of truth but with a meta layer of being critical of demystification itself” (p. 480).

Of note: The use of a post-critical frame is not uncommon: Madison (2012) draws heavily on the work of post-structural theorists to ground her own explanation of critical ethnography. She also cites an example of a critical ethnography of gay men that uses a Foucauldian theory of subjectivity to frame the research. Additionally, Martino’s (2003) critical study of masculinity uses a post-structural lens to understand practices of normalization and self-surveillance among a group of males.

2.2 Methodological Framework

I turn now to a discussion of the methodological framework that I employed in this research. The process of developing a coherent methodology was one that took a number of different directions and turns. Below I have provided not only an accounting of my ultimate methodological choices but also an account of the various stages of my journey and how that journey influenced the final destination. The first stage in determining my eventual methodology necessitated a general exploration of qualitative methodologies, a task which I began in my doctoral classes. This exploration provided the groundwork and basic ontological understandings that would underpin my research.

Qualitative research methodologies seek to understand human experience; as well, they are often defined in opposition to quantitative methodologies and positivism. Madison (2012) notes that positivism is founded in a belief in empiricism, that is, the idea
that we can understand experience by isolating it from external variables. Such research assumes that there is a reality that is independent of context and that can be objectively known. Tamboukou and Ball (2003) add that positivist research is based on measurements of internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity. Researchers engaged in positivist work seek to generalize experiences (because context is unimportant or can be controlled for). A qualitative ontology, by contrast, is based in the understanding that experience is contextual and hence generalizations are inherently problematic (Carspecken, 1996). In educational research, traditions such as standardized testing illustrate the continued tenure of positivism and quantitative measures of success, but such frameworks are now placed alongside qualitative studies. Positivism began to be widely challenged in educational research in the 1960s and 1970s (Noblit et al., 2004); in response, a post-positivist framework arose, founded on the idea that positivism is inadequate to explain the complexities of experience (Lather, 1991). This framework acknowledged the importance of context but still measured the quality of research in largely positivist terms (Denzin, 1997). Moving beyond both positivism and post-positivism, we come to the interpretive tradition of qualitative research. An interpretive paradigm suggests that reality is constructed intersubjectively through our experiences and that context is a critical component of our understanding (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Finally, beyond this we find critical and post-perspectives, as I have described above (Lather, 2006).
2.2.1 Beginning with Ethnography

As I began to plan for my research, I imagined that the focus of my study would be on the online communities/spaces that we had designed as part of the course experience in ECS210. Because I was interested in students’ interactions in these spaces, as well as the culture that was created there, I was initially drawn to an ethnographic methodology, which I outline below. It is important, however, to note that although I describe some specific features of ethnographic research below, there is little agreement on what exactly constitutes this methodology; boyd (2008a) notes that “many aspects of ethnography, its use, and its referents are contested” (p. 47), while Tamboukou and Ball (2003) argue that, despite many efforts to restrict and prescribe ethnography, it “remains theoretically promiscuous” (p. 11). Indeed, though his text is entitled Critical Ethnography in Educational Research, Carspecken (1996) rarely uses the term ethnography, preferring instead to refer simply to critical qualitative methods, as he argues that it is the qualitative and interpretive associations that mark traditional ethnography.

Despite these complexities, the field of ethnography stems from a common history and shares some basic characteristics. Much ethnographic research draws on the interpretive tradition (though, as is evident in the writing of some ethnographers, there is still a tendency to want to legitimize ethnographic research along positivist lines). As a methodology, ethnography traces its beginnings to the field of British anthropology in the 1800s and later to the Chicago school of ethnography, which dates back to the early 1900s (Thomas, 1993); it is rooted in cultural anthropology and “oriented toward the description and interpretation of cultural behaviors” (Schram, 2003, p. 95). Deegan
(2001) adds that, historically, ethnography involved trying to describe and represent the worldview of the other and thus required that the ethnographer experience the other’s life. In the methodology’s earliest incarnations, “armchair ethnographers” sent questionnaires to far-off lands via sailors, missionaries, and other explorers in order to gather understandings of the “other;” it was not until the end of the nineteenth century that ethnographers actually went in person to study other cultures (Madison, 2012). Atkinson et al. (2001) note that while ethnographic fieldwork was originally done primarily in “exotic” locales, it is now applied to a variety of cultural settings and social milieus.

Macdonald (2001) notes that the British tradition of ethnography, which is rooted in social anthropology, began with the work of Bronislaw Malinowski around 1920. Malinowski, in an effort to distinguish his work from the broader tradition of anthropology, outlined ethnography as long-term fieldwork done on location and focused on a specific group of people; his own work as an ethnographer began with a two-year study in New Guinea. Malinowski’s ethnography was aimed at understanding the “native’s” point of view on life through first-hand contact. He conceived it as both practice and product, and his methods included participant observation, interviews, and surveys.

In the United States, the roots of ethnography emerge from the Chicago School. Deegan (2001) traces the emergence of this school, which was initially created with the intent to train sociologists. In contrast to Malinowski’s “exotic” locales for fieldwork, the core works of the Chicago school, done primarily under the oversight of Robert Park and Ernest Burgess, included many studies done in urban landscapes, focusing on street-corner culture of Chicago, juvenile delinquents, and the American south, and with
particular attention paid to the issue of race. The Chicago School’s ethnography was based in pragmatism and took up the work of George Mead and John Dewey. Mead, for instance, argued for a theory of symbolic interactionism: that is, we learn to be human through our interactions with others, which aid us in understanding societal norms. Rock (2001) notes that this theory is based on the belief that all actions occur in a particular situation, so that the actor acts to confront particular problems and then reorganizes their understanding based on what is learned by acting. Taking up this theory, an ethnographer could enter into the community in the role of the other and learn about that community by acting within it. Like the British tradition, the Chicago School of ethnography was centred around the necessity of living (and even working) for extended periods within the cultures being studied and drew on multiple methods in order to triangulate results (Deegan, 2001).

The early tradition of ethnography was steeped in colonialism; it assumed a privileged and objective viewpoint on the part of the observer (Macdonald, 2001). Indeed, until its intersection with post-modern/post-structural theories, ethnography was largely a (White) boys’ club (Deegan, 2001). With the advent of post-modernism, traditional models of ethnographic research (already under fire for issues of representation, or lack thereof) were subject to increased scrutiny and have been criticized for their frequent essentializing of cultures, as well as for the perception - often created by ethnographic texts - that cultures existed in isolated and fixed bubbles, a perception that has obviously been demonstrated to be untrue in our increasingly globalized world (Spencer, 2001). Indeed, in 1997, Denzin noted that “the classic realist ethnographic text is now under attack” (p. xiii). Thus, in order to differentiate itself from
its historical roots, Lather (2001) notes that ethnography after the post-modern turn has often been called the “new” ethnography.

### 2.2.2 Key Features of (New) Ethnographic Research

Despite its methodological and theoretical “promiscuity” (Tamboukou & Ball, 2003), ethnography does have some key features that are helpful in understanding the methodology. Ethnography is, first and foremost, a study of cultures; boyd (2008a) writes that ethnographies “make sense of cultural practices in the context of everyday life. [They are] a descriptive account of cultural practices, grounded in data attained [sic] through ethnographic fieldwork and situated in conversation with broader theoretical frameworks” (p. 46). Not surprisingly, given its early focus on exotic lands, Lather (2001) writes that ethnography as a methodology lies “between travelogue and science, narrative and method, story and data,” both humanistic and scientific in nature (p. 481). It is both process and product; that is, ethnography describes both the doing of the research and the eventual texts that are produced (Schram, 2003). Madison (2012) notes that ethnographic methods are based heavily in fieldwork; these methods often include observation (with the creation of fieldnotes that contain “thick” or highly detailed levels of description (Geertz, 1973)) interviewing, and, in some cases, surveying.

If ethnography is based in the study of culture, it is perhaps important to give an accounting of the myriad definitions that might be applied to the term “culture.” Thomas (1993) notes that culture “refers to the totality of all learned social behavior of a given group; it provides . . . the rules and symbols of interpretation and discourse” and includes religion, ideology, and organizational arrangements (p. 12); moreover, it “establishes the
foundation for communicating meanings and the ways by which these meanings are reproduced and transmitted” (p. 13). Kozinets (2010) cites John Bodley’s view of culture as a way to “refer to a society in its total way of life . . . providing a generally accepted definition of culture as socially-patterned human thought and action” (p. 11). Like Thomas, Kozinets stresses the importance of communication as a foundation for culture.

In this dissertation, I take the term “culture” to mean, generally, the norms and patterns that govern the ways in which a particular group of people (whether bounded by geography or by some other common characteristic) interact and communicate with one another. Culture is necessarily shaped by power-knowledge relations and by discourse, and in some senses, culture is synonymous with discourse; following a post-structural theorizing (described in detail below), culture and the subject are in constant interplay, with the subject being produced by the culture and the culture being shaped, in turn, by the subject’s re/inscriptions of cultural patterns or discourses.

2.2.3 Ethnography Through a (Post) Critical Lens

More recent revisions of ethnography have acknowledged the impossibility of truly “knowing” a culture; indeed, representations of a culture are “built upon the points of understanding and misunderstanding that occur” between researcher and researched and are always “partial,” true of “a certain time, under specific circumstances, and from a particular perspective” (Schram, 2003, p. 95). Moreover, of course, an interpretation of a culture is always bound up in the researcher’s ways of knowing, so that there should be a foundational “acknowledgement of responsibility to talk about your identity as a researcher, why you question what you do, what you choose not to report, how you frame
your data, on whom you focus attention, and who is protected and not protected as you conduct your research” (Schram, 2003, p. 98). This perspective is central to critical ethnography. In contrast to ethnography’s interpretivist lens, critical ethnography takes up a collaborative stance alongside a “serious political intent to change people’s consciousness, if not their daily lives” (Foley, 2002, p. 140). More importantly, it "involves disrupting the status quo and challenging those institutions and regimes that limit choices, constrain resources and marginalize identities...critical ethnographic approaches simultaneously examine axes of race, class, culture, gender, and history" (Dutta, 2014, p. 92). For instance, in her research, Marx (2006) attempts to both understand how “Whiteness and passive racism influence the ways that White educators make sense of children of color” and to “challenge these negative influences by confronting the beliefs of educators with the intention of changing them” (p. 19).

Taking up these central tenets of a critical lens, it is evident that ethnography can no longer be undertaken as an objective project, with a researcher set apart from the research, and ignoring the networks of power, privilege, and discourse that underpin a culture. Instead, Apple (1996) notes that all research is performed by subjects with political and epistemological stances, and Lather (2001) argues that “educational inquiry is increasingly viewed as no more outside the power/knowledge nexus than any other human enterprise” (p. 6). However, although Apple and Lather would argue that all research is therefore in a sense political, a critical lens takes the political as its central aim.

Madison (2012) notes three positions that the researcher can take in qualitative research - that of the ventriloquist, where the researcher aims towards neutrality and tries
to erase their own presence; that of voice, where the focus is on the voices of the participants and the ethnographer’s self is minimized; and that of activism, in which the ethnographer’s positionality is evident and the aim is to expose and critique oppressive or hegemonic practices. The critical lens takes up the third of these positions. Thomas (1993) notes that the critical lens questions our commonsense understandings of the world in order to effect change; he argues that “conventional ethnography describes what is; critical ethnography asks what could be” (p. 4), introducing the critical lens’ emancipatory aims. He also notes that while earlier ethnographers often spoke for the people and cultures they studied, critical ethnography takes on the task of speaking “on behalf” of those it studies (p. 4, emphasis in original). However, the issue of voice in critical and post-critical ethnography is contested, and later critical ethnography is more focused on putting emancipatory power into the hands of participants. For instance, Johnston (2004) goes a bit further in his outline of the aims of critical ethnography, noting that it should “explicate socially contingent, alternative strategies of mobilizing and sustaining affirmative, reconstructive collective social action, [and] ensure that post-critical ethnographers be willing to exercise leadership in pursuit of that endeavor” (p. 71). Similarly, Lather (2001) traces the goals of critical ethnography to a desire for “illuminating the exercise of power in culturally specific yet socially reproductive processes” (p. 479); while traditional ethnography keeps a detached position from its subjects, Lather notes that critical ethnography is concerned with “activist collaboration with oppressed groups” (p. 479).

In her work, Madison (2012) describes critical ethnography as “critical theory in action” (p. 14). She writes that a critical lens is about finding and addressing injustice
within a particular setting, so that “the critical ethnographer . . . takes us beneath surface appearances, disrupts the status quo, and unsettles both neutrality and taken-for-granted assumptions by bringing to light underlying and obscure operations of power and control” (p. 5). Thus, the goals of critical ethnography are two-fold: to understand the ways in which power and regimes of knowledge operate unseen in a culture to privilege or marginalize particular groups, and to open the space for emancipatory work alongside research participants. It is important to note that while the work of critical ethnography is often with marginalized groups, this is not a requirement; indeed, Marx (2006) offers a rich example of her own work with White pre-service teachers, both in exploring the cultural understandings that they brought to their placements, and in working alongside them to help them to recognize their own passive racism in order to begin to change their worldviews.

2.2.4 A Thousand Tiny Methodologies: Taking Up Methodological Promiscuity

Given the above interpretation of “culture,” my own initial conception of my research aligned well with ethnography because of my focus on a particular online space/culture. However, while I began my research within an ethnographic frame and employed some ethnographic methods in my data collection, my eventual approach to the research (that is, my ultimate methodology) draws on a number of frameworks and resists the positivist division of neatly labeled methodological boxes (a logical step, I believe, given Tamboukou and Ball (2003)’s description of ethnography itself as “promiscuous”).

Indeed, Foucault (1970/1966) notes that our imposition of unnatural orders and strict definitions defies realities and is simply an attempt to “tame the wild profusion of
existing things” (p. xv); instead, I draw on Lather’s (2006) idea of paradigm proliferation, or, playing off of Deleuze and Guattari, the notion of a “thousand tiny paradigms” or methodologies (Lather, 2006, p. 43). Lather argues for “the need to prepare education doctoral students for ‘epistemological diversity’ outside of consensus models” (p. 36) so that “students develop an ability to locate themselves in the tensions that characterize fields of knowledge” (p. 47); she also calls for doing work that “holds together necessary incompatibilities” (p. 36) in order to better represent the variety and complexity that constitutes educational research. This is what I have attempted to do in my own work.

Consequently, in addition to ethnographic features, my research also draws on the field of critical discourse analysis, which I discuss below; additionally, as I explain later, the methods I have chosen to use in the data gathering portion of the interviews take up some research methods more closely associated with grounded theory.

2.2.5 Critical Discourse Analysis as Methodology

As noted above, the term “discourse” may take on a variety of different meanings; however, for the purposes of this dissertation, I take up the term in a Foucauldian sense, as described earlier. Given this interpretation, it seems logical that I take up the idea of “critical discourse analysis” in a way that remains true to this idea of “discourse,” specifically, drawing on Fairclough’s work in this area.

The idea of critical discourse analysis (CDA) “subsumes a variety of approaches towards the social analysis of discourse …which differ in theory, methodology, and the type of research issues to which they tend to give prominence” (Fairclough, 2001, p. 1), but “in social sciences [it] is often strongly influenced by the work of Foucault”
Unsurprisingly, then, Waller (2006) notes that Fairclough himself takes up and extends a Foucauldian understanding of discourse, as “a way of constituting knowledge about a particular topic at a historical moment through language in speech and text or images and sounds, or representations in postures, movements and structures which shape or are shaped by institutions, situations and structures.” (p. 4).

Employing a Foucauldian understanding of discourse might make it seem as though any analysis of said discourse would fall solidly under the umbrella of “post” perspectives. However, upon closer examination, the appendage of the term “critical” to Fairclough’s work becomes more clear. Waller (2006) writes that Fairclough’s CDA is “an approach to deconstructing society which aims to critically investigate possible social inequality as it is expressed, constituted, legitimized, and so on, by language use (or in discourse)” (Waller, 2006, p. 9). CDA “explores the connections between the use of language and the social, historical and political contexts in which it occurs, how language is used in social interactions and how language influences social relations and practices” (Waller, 2006, p. 10); it is “a means of systematically approaching the relationships between language and social structure” (Candlin, 2010, p. vii). Thompson (1984) adds the following:

A primary focus of CDA is on the effect of power relations and inequalities in producing social wrongs, and in particular on discursive aspects of power relations and inequalities: on dialectical relations between discourse and power, and their effects on other relations within the social process and their elements. This includes questions of ideology, understanding ideologies to be ‘meaning in the service of power.’” (p. 8)
Essentially, CDA is a form of discourse analysis that aims to analyze discourse (with discourse being understood in a broad sense that goes beyond just words), with an eye to understanding how said discourse operates to produce the systems, institutions, and subject positions that privilege some and marginalize others. Importantly, though, Fairclough’s conception of CDA goes beyond simply understanding how discourse operates to constitute our “reality” and aims to employ this understanding in order to take social action (hence the critical lens). Candlin (2010) remarks on Fairclough’s “abiding concern for the relevance of critical discourse analytical research as an [sic] contributive agent for social change; in education, in the media, in the political order, and in respect of the economic drivers of contemporary society” (p. ix). To underscore this point, he adds:

[Fairclough’s] discussion . . . of how participants, in his terms, construe their worlds, and how they reflexively seek to change aspects of such worlds, to reconstruct them, offers considerable backing to those researchers and participants intent on pursuing a reflexive and critical agenda. (p. viii)

It should be noted, however, that Fairclough himself cautions us on the limits of CDA as a mechanism for social action: “We cannot transform the world in any old way we happen to construe it; the world is such that some transformations are possible and others are not” (Fairclough, 2010, p. 5). Here, I believe, we see shades of Foucault’s constrained agency, a reminder of Fairclough’s ontological foundation.
2.3 Putting It All Together: Coming to a Collaborative, Post-Critical Discourse

Analysis of the Online Spaces Inhabited by Pre-service Teachers

Having now outlined the relevant contributors to my methodological framework, I turn, finally, to the task of synthesizing the above strands into a more-or-less coherent final product, recognizing that describing said product is a messy task and that methodological groupings should be slippery. In my initial proposal, I noted that my study was focused on the online community developed as part of ECS210 and hence on a segment of participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006), and that I hoped to understand and interpret processes by which my students made meaning within the micro-culture of the course and the larger culture of the networked spaces in the midst of which the class is situated. As such, I concluded that it was logical to draw in large part from an ethnographic methodology, and in this case in particular from critical ethnography, due to ethnography’s orientation “toward the description and interpretation of cultural behaviors” (Schram, 2003, p. 95).

However, as the research progressed, it became clear that the discourse used by pre-service teachers as they considered their own digital identity was of greater importance than the online space itself. Thus, examining the discursive processes involved in students’ meaning making in the digital spaces of ECS210 became a major area of focus. Consequently, I chose to draw upon Marx’s (2006) work with White pre-service teachers, described above, which provides an example of what might be called a post-critical ethnography, but one that unfolds in conversation and relationship with her participants (hence the addition of “collaborative” in the section title above). She begins by sketching a picture of her participants, both individually and collectively, in order to
unpack the discursive constructions that underpin the passive racism in their language and actions, particularly in the context of their work in the classroom. Then, through conversations and examinations of the students’ own words and texts, she helps them to acknowledge and interrogate their own racism. She then analyzes this process, pulling out themes that resonate from the conversations and ultimately venturing suggestions that others might take up in doing their own work of this kind.

While I will discuss the methods I employed in analyzing the data in Chapter 4, I note here that my ultimate theoretical and methodological structure took up many aspects of Marx’s framework. This meant that while I drew upon elements of Fairclough’s CDA in order to analyze the discursive processes utilized by the students, I also chose to do something with what I uncovered, and thus, in keeping with the critical framework, I employed a recursive strategy. Throughout the interview process, I continually analyzed the interview data and then used this analysis to engage in discussions with the participants with the aim of helping them to unpack those discourses that shaped their understandings of teacher identity. By encouraging the participants to challenge the ways in which the discourses of the “good” teacher had shaped their understanding of their identities, I hoped to provide the possibility of a new way of seeing the self and consequently an avenue for challenging these dominant (and problematic) discourses.

In regard to the critical lens, I should note that my research involved work with a privileged (on the whole) group of participants; thus, the aims of my research were not emancipatory in terms of giving voice to (underprivileged) participants. Instead, I hoped that my work with participants might ultimately lead to a better understanding of the
ways in which we might leverage the affordances of digital spaces to disrupt, rather than reinscribe, oppressive practices and beliefs.
Chapter 3: Review of the Relevant Literature

In order to lay the necessary foundation for my dissertation research, as a first step I performed a review of the literature in several key areas. This literature review includes an overview of key topics related to the content of my inquiry, namely, the unique characteristics of online spaces, the complexities of digital identity construction, and current theories related to the use of social media as a tool for social justice. Additionally, the review includes an outline of post-structuralism and post-structural understandings of identity (subject) construction, which form the theoretical underpinnings for my research, as well as an exploration of the literature surrounding the construction of the “good” teacher as subject, specifically.

3.1 Digital Identity/Identity in the Digital Era

Given the fundamental ways in which technology has altered so many aspects of our daily lives, it is hardly surprising that Poster (2001) argues that digital culture has changed the very ways in which we structure our conception of the self. Turkle (1997) agrees that new media has changed “our very identities” (p. 9), particularly in the way that it has led to “eroding boundaries between the real and the virtual” (p. 10). Indeed, Turkle notes that the line between human and technology becomes harder to distinguish as much of our lives are now lived onscreen. Because of this blurring of lines, she argues that “computers brought philosophy into everyday life” (p. x) by asking us to question the very nature of identity in a world where technology looks increasingly human.
3.1.1 Revisiting a Post-Structural Theorizing of Identity

As I noted in Chapter 2, post-structural theorizing dismantles the modernist view of identity as unitary, stable, and pre-given. Instead, subjects are constituted through the continued interplay between body and discourse in the midst of a complex, capillary-like network of power (Foucault, 1980f). Butler (1997) argues that the existence of a pre-given subject becomes unimportant because it is impossible even to imagine “a body that has not yet been given social definition” (p. 5). Importantly, subjectivation is a dual act of sorts; when we are recognized by discourse, we simultaneously become a subject (thus, conferring agency) and become subject (thus, constraining our possible selves) (Henriques et al., 1998).

One critical feature of a post-structural theorizing of identity is that it implies a self that is constantly changing; we are not subjectivated one time only, but instead our subjecthood is continuously reinscribed. For instance, writing specifically about gender, Butler (1990) notes that it is not something innate and fixed, that there is “no gender identity behind the expressions of gender” (p. 25), but rather that one’s gender is something one is always becoming through repetitive acts or performances: a “repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (p. 33). If we extend this same thinking to other aspects of identity, we begin to see how the subject is not unitary and fixed but is rather constituted through its own performance of particular discourses. Butler is not suggesting, however, that the performative nature of identity means that we can simply perform whatever identity we choose. Indeed, the options available to us are always constrained by discourse; even our desire to perform
particular identities is constrained by discourse. Butler notes that gender, and in turn identity, is a function of a discourse which:

seeks to set certain limits to analysis or to safeguard certain tenets of humanism as pre-suppositional to any analysis. . . . The limits of the discursive analysis of gender [or other facets of the subject] presuppose and preempt the possibilities of imaginable and realizable gender configurations within culture. . . . The limits are always set within the terms of a hegemonic cultural discourse predicated on binary structures that appear as the language of universal rationality. Constraint is thus built into what that language constitutes as the imaginable domain. (p. 9)

Thus, for our performance of a particular identity to be intelligible, it must cite existing discourses, and we must be authorized to perform those particular identities (Butler, 1997). However, Foucault (1980f) notes that discourse and power do not operate in open and transparent ways; therefore, we cannot assume that the subject is aware of being shaped discursively. These theories of both the nature of agency and the hidden functioning of discourse become especially important later in this chapter as we examine some of the dominant theories of digital identity construction.

It is important here to note some significant connections between digital identity formation and a Foucauldian understanding of power, and the concomitant implications for the ways in which we monitor our online selves. In the current era of increasing technology and digital presence, the metaphor of the Panopticon (described in Chapter 2) extends to online spaces; phenomena such as context collapse (Wesch, 2009), in which digital content is produced not for a particular audience but is rather potentially accessible to countless unknown and unseen viewers, lead to the type of omnipresent
surveillance described by Foucault. Moreover, a growing obsession with the sanitization of digital identity, both due to legitimate concerns for future employment and (what might be termed) scare-tactics around online predation and illegal online activity, has led to a form of governmentality or self-surveillance in our efforts to control our digital footprints. It is therefore important to keep the effects of technologies of power in mind when doing research in online spaces.

3.1.2 Digital Birth and Digital Life

Digital identity begins at a young age. As they post baby pictures (or even sonograms), parents have become “curators” of their children’s online selves (Hu, 2014). In 2014, research in ten first world countries showed that 30% of children had a digital footprint before they were born (AVG, 2014), while the average digital birth of children in 2010 was at six-months of age (Business Wire, 2010). As they grow older, children spend a great deal of time interacting with the Internet and other media: a 2017 study found that American children aged eight and younger spend on average 48 minutes a day on a mobile device and 2 hours and 19 minutes on screen media generally, with 42% of these children actually possessing their own tablet device (Howard, 2017). A 2015 study found that children ages eight to twelve spend an average of six hours a day consuming media for enjoyment, while those twelve to eighteen spend nine hours; these numbers do not include time spent using media for school-related purposes (Wallace, 2015). As well, in 2018, 45% of U.S. teens reported that they were online “almost constantly” (Anderson & Jiang, 2018).
Prensky (2001) coined the term “digital natives” to describe those generations that have grown up since the explosion of media and technology in the late twentieth century (after 1980, according to Palfrey and Gasser, 2008). Prensky writes that digital natives actually “think and process information fundamentally differently” from their predecessors (p. 1); he terms them digital natives because, he argues, they are native speakers of the language of the Internet and online spaces, as opposed to older “digital immigrants” whose use of technology is not as fluent.

This binary is problematic. Certainly, younger generations on the whole appear, on a surface level, to be more comfortable and fluent using digital media; however, to paint these two groups with sweeping brush strokes, arguing that digital immigrants, for instance, always print out their email, while digital natives uniformly “prefer their graphics before their text rather than the opposite” (Prensky, 2001, p. 2, emphasis in original) achieves little more than essentializing these two groups and setting them up in opposition to each other; such a view buys into modernist conceptions of the subject, suggesting that a hybrid identity is impossible and that our selfhood is defined by the year in which we were born and thus permanently fixed from birth. It is also important to remember that Prensky’s so-called immigrants are, in fact, largely the inventors and innovators who brought our technologically-mediated world into being. Moreover, Sheninger (2014) argues that “just because today’s students have grown up in a technology-rich world does not mean that they know how to effectively and responsibly utilize technology” (p. 158). This is not to say, of course, that Prensky’s terms are entirely useless. At the most basic level, they demonstrate our entrenched desire to binarize, to set up a self in opposition to an “other.” But they also point to the ways in
which technology has fundamentally changed our world and the way that we interact with it - even if to varying degrees for different individuals.

### 3.1.3 Moving Beyond a Modernist Understanding of Digital Identity

Prensky’s (2001) application of a modernist ontology to digital spaces is not uncommon in the literature on digital identity. Interestingly, although many scholars in the field refer to the performance and play of identity online, they often fall back on a modernist view of a unitary and fixed identity that exists in the “real” world, and so it is important to pay attention to the language in use. For instance, Cross (2011) notes that in online spaces, “people online can assume a completely new persona, masking the real one” (p. 125, emphasis added); here, she is falling back on the belief in a realist ontology to explain how performance is something that happens only in the “virtual” world.

Poster (2001) argues that much of the work in theorizing identity in online spaces assumes the existence of pre-formed individuals upon whom technologies are merely enhancements. He is hopeful, however, that technology will make it more difficult to maintain such a modernist view and that we will be able to develop broader conceptions of the idea of identity:

> If modern society may be said to foster an individual who is rational, autonomous, centered, and stable . . . then perhaps a post-modern society is emerging which nurtures forms of identity different from, even opposite to, those of modernity. And electronic communications technologies significantly enhance these post-modern possibilities. (p. 72-73)
Similarly, Turkle (1997), in her earlier work, writes about the ways in which technologies have made it harder for us to cling to the modernist view of the subject that is still pervasive. The ease with which we can perform multiple identities in online spaces challenges the view that identity is fixed and unitary, so that technology is “bringing post-modernism down to earth” (p. 268). Turkle notes that the idea of authenticity loses its meaning in such a context, and this loss of meaning is difficult for us to understand from a modernist ontology. Turkle borrows from Howard Rheingold, however, in imagining that perhaps, if we can move beyond this quest for the authentic self, we can begin to understand a new version of the self in relation to others. She notes, too, that such a shift in ontology would require a new morality.

Like Cross (2011), however, even as Turkle (1997) expands on a post-structural theorizing of the self, her language betrays an entrenched modernist ontology as she notes that online spaces can allow us to present identities “as close to or as far away from your real self as you choose” (p. 183, emphasis added). This refrain of the real offline world surfaces clearly in Turkle’s (2012a, 2012b) later work, where she argues that we have become increasingly alone in our connectedness and instead need to take time to disconnect in order to find our real (and, we are meant to understand, better) selves.

3.2 Online Spaces and Digital Identity

Thus far, it is apparent both that digital technologies do a great deal to shape many aspects of our lives, including the very ways in which we think about identity, and that modernist and post-structural theorizations are very much in tension on the subject of digital identity. I turn now to the nature of online spaces and how the unique features of
digital environments add complexity to the issue of digital identity. In examining this area, I have attempted to overlay a post-structural lens to understand the different conceptions of digital identity construction, because, as Agger (2001) notes, while (in his opinion) we live in a modernist era, post-modern understandings are required to theorize the virtual self.

boyd (2014) notes that social media, and social networks in particular, are “actively shaping and being shaped by contemporary society” (p. 26). Wesch (2009) remarks that each new platform, be it Facebook, Instagram, or LinkedIn, provides a new way of thinking about and relating to others. Through their structured modes of communication and profile creation, these spaces dictate, to a certain extent, the ways in which we are able to interact (which, as I discuss below, is part of Lanier’s (2011) argument regarding the dangers of digital platforms: that they will lock in certain ways of being, to the exclusion of others). Thus, social networking sites can actually shape the ways in which others view the digital identities that we are cultivating. For instance, Facebook uses a complex algorithm to determine which posts are visible on users’ timelines, so that “If the algorithm is designed to systematically “demote” one’s posts about world affairs and “promote” one’s meme posts, over time one starts to look more like a person obsessed with memes and less like a person interested in world affairs” (Millar, 2014); similarly, Twitter recently changed its default settings so that users need to opt in to show everyone’s retweets and replies to their tweets, rather than those “tailored” to them.

Like Wesch and boyd, Palfrey and Gasser (2008) note that relationships are changed by digitally mediated communications: “They have a different tenor from face-
to-face relationship: They are often fleeting; they are easy to enter into with a few mouse clicks; and they are easy to leave, without so much as a goodbye. But they are also perhaps enduring in ways we have yet to understand” (p. 32-33). This shift is apparent in, for instance, digital technologies such as the use of video calling, which complicate the idea of presence (Couros, 2013a). It is also evident in our intimate relationships, where dating is now frequently marked by status changes on Facebook and where the ever-present memories on social media make breaking up a more complicated process (Bilton, 2014), so much so that some couples have turned to social media clauses in their prenuptial agreements (Roy, 2014). The rise of online dating, too, has brought attention to issues of anonymity and “authentic” identity in digital spaces, so that digital literacies must include an awareness of the dangers of “catfishing” (that is, using someone else’s photos or personal data to start online relationships for the purpose of scamming others for monetary gain) or other types of identity theft (see, for instance, Couros, 2013b; Hensley, 2014). Digital communications have also changed even practices such as mourning, with some arguing that our global relationships have removed the centrality of physical proximity in the process of grief (Bruenig, 2014); others have written about how the persistence of digital artifacts can complicate our ability to move beyond mourning (Buntin, 2014).

Given these shifts, Stewart (2015) argues that social media has become a (if not the) defining force of our time:

Facebook – and more broadly, social media in general…but Facebook remains for the moment the space of the widest participation across demographics even while targeting ads designed to keep people IN their existing demographics – is the
stage upon which the battle over dominant cultural narratives is played out. Social media is where we are deciding who we are, not just as individual digital identities but AS A PEOPLE, A SOCIETY. (n.p.)

Despite this important role, we are only just beginning to understand the effects (both good and bad) that online communication (and particularly anonymous online communication) has on our relationships with strangers, but the evidence ranges across a wide spectrum and is often contradictory. For instance, Suler (2004) coined the term “online disinhibition effect” to describe the phenomenon in which people tend to say more unkind things when cloaked in digital anonymity, but we also know that this same anonymity can have powerful positive effects such as increasing participation and healthy risk-taking in online learners (Konnikova, 2013).

3.2.1 Online Versus Offline Worlds and Selves

The theme of online vs. offline worlds resurfaces again and again in the literature on digital identity. Palfrey and Gasser (2008) argue that there is increasingly little difference between our offline and online identities as the two spaces become more and more intertwined. However, perhaps given the persistence of modernist ontologies and their fascination with and emphasis on visual reality (Denzin, 1997), the prevailing discourse in many circles still sees online spaces as less real and thus the concomitant identities that we take on there as less real as well. Indeed, there is a dominant narrative that buys into the myth of digital dualism, that is, the separation of on- and offline worlds into a binary opposition (Jurgenson, 2011), as is evident in popular videos such as “Look Up” (Turk, 2014) and “I Forgot My Phone” (deGuzman, 2013).
The idea of “digital dualism,” however, is a fallacy; instead, our “real” and “virtual” lives are blended and increasingly inseparable from each other (Jurgenson, 2011). Indeed, Jurgenson (2013) argues that videos such as “I Forgot My Phone” demonstrate a fetishization of presence: what he calls the IRL (in real life) fetish (Jurgenson, 2012), despite the fact that research suggests that mobile devices are used to connect more with others, not less. Indeed, digital dualism and the IRL fetish create false binaries of the on- and offline worlds. Jurgenson (2012) notes:

This idea that we are trading the offline for the online, though it dominates how we think of the digital and the physical, is myopic. It fails to capture the plain fact that our lived reality is the result of the constant interpenetration of the online and offline. That is, we live in an augmented reality that exists at the intersection of materiality and information, physicality and digitality, bodies and technology, atoms and bits, the off- and the online. It is wrong to say “IRL” to mean offline: Facebook is real life. (n.p., emphasis in original)

As Jurgenson argues, the online world depends on the offline world; it merely extends and augments it. Indeed, Haraway (1990) argues that we are all cyborgs or chimeras, “theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism” (p. 191). Viewing the subject in such a light, she suggests, opens up the possibility that we might someday move past our collective fear of “permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints” (p. 196) and thus be able to see identity as shifting and sit comfortably with conflicting ideologies.

If we view the on- and offline worlds as wholly interconnected, however, we can no longer argue for separate online and offline selves; rather, if we see identity as playful
and shifting in online spaces, then it must extend to offline spaces as well. As noted, however, this runs in opposition to the dominant modernist view of identity, which perhaps begins to explain the continued desire to separate the on- and offline worlds.

### 3.2.2 Complexities of Digital Identity

Some specific features of online spaces and digitally mediated communication lead to complexities in digital identity formation. boyd (2008a), who has done extensive research into the sharing habits of youth online (see, for instance, boyd, 2008b, 2014), observes that our communications in digital spaces have four unique characteristics: persistence (that is, they are difficult to erase); replicability (that is, they are easily copied by others); scalability (that is, they can easily be viewed and shared by huge numbers of people); and searchability (that is, they are easily found by others). These features of digital communications are central to many of the challenges surrounding digital identity, as they make it increasingly difficult to control the way we appear online. Indeed, Palfrey and Gasser (2008) argue that our digital identities are insecure; we are not in control of them because of the very ways in which social networks are designed.

Palfrey and Gasser (2008) note that the Internet forces us to re-evaluate the ways in which we manage and think about our identity. They distinguish between personal identities (that is, our personal characteristics) and social identities (that, in relation to others) and note that in our digitally mediated society, our social identities especially are now much less within our control because of the characteristics of online sharing: with the pieces of our online selves so easily shared, replicated, and kept online forever, it is more difficult to simply “reinvent” oneself. Interestingly, while Palfrey and Gasser note
that young people try out multiple identities in online spaces, just as youth have always
done in offline spaces, our online selves can be more easily tracked (that is, they are
searchable) than ever before.

Consequently, Palfrey and Gasser (2008) outline two paradoxes about identity in
a digital age. First, they note that while we can easily shape and change our online
identities, we have less control than ever before about how our identities are perceived by
others because of the ways in which aspects of our identities may be replicated and
shaped by others. Second, although we can easily present multiple different identities
online, these identities are more likely to converge than, say, our work and personal
identities would have in offline spaces, and thus we are perhaps more bound to a unitary
identity than ever.

Additionally, given the public, unstable nature of our digital identities, Palfrey
and Gasser (2008) note that our identities are now shaped in large part by “intentional
digital contributions” such as blogs, YouTube videos, or social networking profiles (p.
23). They note, however, that inequalities arise due to gaps in technology access; the
digital divide means that those without access are less able to control their identities
because they are not always able to contribute positively to them and therefore rely on
what others say about them online. Moreover, increasingly, we are developing techniques
to manage our identities on social media sites. Interestingly, despite the panic about
teens’ recklessness online, research by Wolak et al. (2012), Madden (2010), and Madden
(2012) has found that young people are at least as, if not more, aware of techniques they
can use to achieve particular degrees of privacy than are adults. boyd (2010) also found
that students are demonstrating innovative ways of managing online networking profiles.
She cites an example of one student on Facebook who deactivates her account so that no one can post on her wall while she is not logged in, and another who deletes all comments and messages after a few days to avoid future conflicts.

Another complexity is the “culture of the overshare,” where the lines between public and private are increasingly blurred and people disclose a great deal of personal information that would previously have been private (Cross, 2011); Cross terms it a “culture of exposure, where social media seem to invite us to let it all hang out in an orgy of exhibitionism, self-involvement, and confession” (p. 124). At the same time, our oversharing is the subject of much scrutiny and judgment; for instance, a recent study found that young women who posted “sexy” profile pictures on social networking sites were rated as less competent and less likely to be good friends (Franchise Herald, 2014). Interestingly, though, Cross also remarks that “we learn to perform the self in our blogs and tweets and social networks . . . to convey an impression we think others may find more acceptable” (p. 124). Obviously, then, there is some tension around performing an appropriate identity amidst the “orgy of exhibitionism;” Cross’ statements seem at some level quite contradictory. Moreover, the recent near obsession with “cyber-safety” and the ubiquitous messages about the need to be safe online has, in my experience working with pre-service teachers, led in the years since Cross published her book to a pervasive fear about ruining one’s digital reputation. To be sure, instances of questionable and inappropriate sharing online still abound, especially among younger populations.

However, it seems that for many of my students the discourse of online safety, coupled with the discourse of the “good” teacher as neutral and moral (discussed in Chapter 6 below) has led to a push in the opposite direction, toward a sanitized identity, resulting,
ironically, in the need to encourage these pre-service teachers to actively develop and expand their digital footprints in positive ways.

A final complexity involved in digital identity surrounds the idea of ownership. Given the persistence of online artefacts, the question arises as to who owns the social media accounts of deceased persons. Facebook now allows the option of memorializing accounts after death; however, Duggan (2014) writes that laws are currently being proposed to allow a fiduciary to take control of digital assets in the same way as they can control physical assets following death. Additionally, issues of scalability and searchability come into play so that we are now faced, as a society, with questions of how we might remove unwanted aspects of identity online (ironically, how we might return to our fixed and unitary selves). A recent European court decision awarded the “right to be forgotten” in certain cases, forcing Google to block or remove particular search results upon request, though the logistics of such a ruling are still largely being worked out (White & Benoit, 2014). Evidently, then, many complexities arise surrounding digital identity, and we are only beginning to understand the far-reaching implications.

3.2.3 Identity Play and Performativity in Online Worlds

Adding to the complexity of digital identity is the extent to which online spaces are anonymous or at least lack stable referents to the offline world. Hine (2000) notes that there exists “in the new media the provision of new conditions for subject formation, which amount to a decentering and dispersal of the subject” (p. 7), so that online spaces allow for “playing with the self” (p. 7). Indeed, many online spaces are set up to allow for identity play. Sites like Second Life, other role-playing games and virtual worlds, and
Multi-User Domains (MUDs) allow for deliberate identity play and experimentation. In other spaces, we are explicitly asked to define ourselves as we choose, so that social networking sites ask us to “compose and project an identity” through the creation of a profile (Turkle, 2012a, p. 180). Turkle (2012b) remarks that “technology allows us to present the self we want to be” through careful editing and performance.

The idea of identity play aligns with theorists who propose that identity in online (and, in the case of some theorists, offline) spaces is performed. For instance, Papacharissi (2012) takes up the language of performativity theorists such as Richard Schechner to describe the ways in which the self becomes inscribed through repeated acts (similar to a Butlerian view). She writes:

Social roles associated with gender, race, and class, as well as those involved in professional, family, and social circles, are performed through repeated behaviors.

. . . Performances of the self are indicative of the shapes individuals take on as they claim agency and negotiate power within social structures and imaginaries.

(p. 1990)

Thus, the repeated performance of particular acts leads them to appear normalized, to be inscribed both in cultural understanding of what those roles are “supposed” to look like, and in the bodies of those who are doing the performing.

Applying this theory to digital spaces, Papacharissi (2012) argues for the performance of multiple selves in online contexts:

Information communication technologies, such as Twitter, further augment these tendencies [of performativity] by saturating the self with ever-expanding networks of people, relations, and performance stages. . . . As a result, each self
contains an ever-increasing multiplicity of other selves, or voices. . . . Networked technologies might thus be understood as enabling access to multiple voices or aspects of one's own personality. (p. 1992)

If we take up this theorizing of identity play and performativity alongside the question of digital dualism, however, the question arises: are the playful identities performed in these online spaces any less “authentic” than the identity performances that we put on every day in offline spaces? If we take up the post-structural belief that the self or subject is constantly shifting through the interplay of body and discourse, then we cannot argue that one particular moment of subjection is “more real” than others. It becomes evident, however, that theorists take many different stances of the topic of identity play versus the authentic self.

Turkle (2012a), for instance, notes that we have always had outlets for escaping from our primary selves and lives (for example, playing a different person when on a business trip or engaging in an affair); technology has simply led to a mixing of these different worlds simultaneously, what she calls “multi-lifing” (p. 160). Hine notes, similarly, that “views of identity as performative in all spheres of life predate the Internet and are well established” (p. 119) and that (as I point to above) “the Internet is only a space for identity play as far as the boundary between online and offline is sustained” (p. 120). Both Turkle and Hine, then, seem to acknowledge the breakdown in the on- and offline divide.

Other theorists see the possibilities afforded by technology to break down modernist discourses of the subject: Kozinets cites Lysloff (2003), who argues that the ability to play with identity online might allow for “an actualization of multiple and
perhaps idealized selves through text and imagination” (cited in Kozinets, 2010, p. 37). Such identity play might also allow us to circumvent or hover around the edges of available discourses, leading to possibilities of agency: “Anonymity combines with imagination in ways that allow the exhibition of characteristics and desires that might be difficult, socially unacceptable . . . to express in other contexts” (Kozinets, 2010, p. 70). Of course, while this affordance of anonymity is potentially risky (for instance, it allows predators to pose as non-threatening individuals to trap vulnerable members of the population), it might also open a space to move beyond commonsense understandings of, for instance, gender. Indeed, Poster (2001) notes that MUDs and other online games allow individuals to play with and change their gender during the game, “drastically calling into question the gender system of the dominant culture as a fixed binary” (p. 80). However, one must be cautious not to overstate the possibilities for disruptive acts. Even online identity play still requires the referents of dominant norms of gender in order to be intelligible - in taking up the opposite gender, we are still enacting a particular version of that gender. The play of online identity is arguably less of a relativist free-for-all than it is sometimes posited to be.

Additionally, boyd (2014) contests the degree to which identity play is even possible in the current online world. She notes that while pseudonyms are still common, “the type of identity work taking place on social media sites like Facebook is very different from what Turkle initially imagined” (p. 38). Instead, much of the online socialization among teens happens among friends from offline contexts in spaces where the two settings are closely wedded and lead to greater continuity (and therefore less of an opportunity for identity play) between online and offline worlds.
At the opposite end of the spectrum, Lanier (2011) sees online spaces not as a place for play, but increasingly as constraining our humanness. He warns against “gadget fetishism” (p. 70) and claims that Web 2.0 technologies such as social networking sites are dangerous in that they may potentially “lock in” certain ways of being. As a point of comparison, he describes the way that MIDI (a way to represent music notes digitally) became the standard method for representing music, despite the fact that it was originally designed for keyboard tones and lacks a great deal of the variance needed to represent other types of music. Similarly, Lanier argues that sites that prescribe a particular format for identity construction (for instance, through a standardized profile) may limit the ways in which we can think about identity. Far from the belief that online identity play can lead to disruptions of dominant norms and the creation of multiple identities, Lanier writes that social networking sites lead to a reduction of identity as we categorize ourselves, so that, for instance, one is either single or in a relationship; he notes that the “reduction of life is what gets broadcast between friends all the time. What is communicated between people eventually becomes their truth” (p. 71).

3.2.4 Context Collapse

Related to the issue of identity play and performativity in online spaces are the issues of context and audience. Wesch (2009) notes that “how we present ourselves (and by extension, who we ‘are’) depends a great deal on context; where we are, who we are with, and what we are doing, among many other factors” (p. 22). While Hine (2000) notes that digital identity formation relies heavily on the idea of context, in online spaces such context is often confusing, contradictory, or unseen. boyd (2014), for instance, notes
that in offline spaces, if teens are having an “inappropriate” conversation and someone approaches, they will just stop talking, but “online, there’s no way to change the conversation, both because it’s virtually impossible to know if someone is approaching and because the persistent nature of most social exchanges means that there’s a record of what was previously said” (p. 33). She notes that the “ability to understand how context, audience, and identity intersect is one of the central challenges people face in learning how to navigate social media” (p. 30).

Given the complex nature of online contexts, both Wesch (2009) and boyd (2013) refer to the challenge of “context collapse.” Wesch notes that in face-to-face interactions, we are able to use context clues to determine which self to present. In open digital spaces, however, these context clues are not available, rather, we must be prepared for the self we present to be seen by “an infinite number of contexts collapsing upon one another [...], virtually all possible contexts” and, indeed, by our future selves (p. 23). Wesch cites Goffman’s (1967) idea of face-work, which suggests that we present a particular face that is appropriate to our reading of the context and of social relationships. In online spaces, Wesch argues that “in Goffman’s terms, [we are] ‘out of face’ with no ‘line’ to present, unable to size up the context and situation” (p. 23).

By way of an example, boyd (2014) tells the story of a young man who wrote his college admissions essay about walking away from gang life in Los Angeles; when the admissions committee googled the student, however, they found his MySpace page to be full of gang symbols and jargon. boyd recalls that, when asked why she thought he would lie in his admissions essay when his MySpace account was so easily found, she noted that
“perhaps this young man is simply including gang signals on his MySpace profile as a survival technique” (p. 29). She notes:

My guess was that he was genuine in his college essay. At the same time, I also suspected that he would never dare talk about his desire to go to a prestigious institution in his neighborhood because doing so would cause him to be ostracized socially, if not physically attacked. (p. 30)

For the young man, the MySpace profile is geared towards an audience of his peers; however, due to the searchability of online artefacts, what he posts there is also accessible to countless others, and the aspect of his identity that he has chosen to present is not suitable for all of these potential audiences.

The idea of context collapse, like other issues of digital identity, becomes somewhat problematic when taken up through a post-structural lens. Wesch, Goffman, and others make the case that the self we present is one that we select purposefully, based on context. A post-structural theorizing of subjectivity, however, would suggest that our desire to perform a particular self is always already constructed and shaped by desire. To be sure, Goffman (1967) notes that not all faces are available to us in every situation, but rather that based on the person’s “attributes and the conventionalized nature of the encounter, he [sic] will find . . . a small choice of faces will be waiting for him” (p. 7); however, both he and Wesch still seem to imply a great deal of agency and awareness. To the extent that Wesch (2009) sees a lack of agency, it is in relation to the way that our “face” is perceived:

Although the individual takes an active role in presenting, preserving, and sometimes adjusting his or her face, it is not an object of solo authorship. Face is
not simply defined by the person’s actions, but how those actions are perceived and judged by other participants in the flow of the encounter. Face-work is a complex collaborative dance in which all participants and their every word, wink, gesture, posture, stance, glance, and grunt take part. (p. 22)

Again, such a reading does not account for the ways in which our agency is constrained by particular discourses. Just as those who “play” with gender in online contexts are still referring to pre-existing gender norms, the faces that we choose from are selected, often unconsciously, from available discourses of self-presentation; if they were not, they would be unintelligible. Additionally, both Goffman and those who take him up “leave untheorized a core person . . . who is the actor who takes on and performs the roles” (Henriques et al., 1998, p. 23). That is, though their conceptions of agency suggest a modernist ontology to a degree, there is never any interrogation of the fixed self who is putting on these different faces.

When asked to post about personal or controversial topics online, my students frequently note that they are concerned about possible employers or future students and their parents seeing their online identities and disagreeing with, for instance, their views on socially just education, despite the fact that in face-to-face contexts they are happy to talk about how they are striving to become an anti-oppressive educator. That is, they are attempting to become subject to two discourses at once: the “good” teacher as neutral, a dominant understanding in much of society, and the “good” teacher as anti-oppressive, the dominant understanding in our faculty. Perhaps, then, part of what underlies the issue of context collapse in this case, and in others, is, in fact, the larger issue of cognitive dissonance or ideological incongruence. Unlike Wesch and Goffman, however, I would
argue that the majority of my students are not aware of the discourses they are taking up, and thus they are not, in any real sense, able to choose particular faces as Goffman would contend.

3.2.5 Teachers and Digital Identity: A Delicate Balance

With the many complexities of digital identities, it is not surprising that these issues are especially troubling for educators, given the very public nature of the profession. Indeed, while missteps and bad choices on social media can result in job-loss in other professions (see, for instance, the case of Justine Sacco’s racist tweet (Pilkington, 2013), which went viral while she was on a flight and cost her a job as a PR executive), teachers’ online identities are often subject to much greater scrutiny due to their positions as role models for youth. In addition, Britzman (1991) makes the argument that the liminal identities of future educators complicate things even further: “Marginally situated in two worlds, the student teacher as part student and part teacher has the dual struggle of educating others while being educated. Consequently, student teachers appropriate different voices in the attempt to speak for themselves yet all the while act in a largely inherited and constraining context” (p. 13-14). Thus, pre-service teachers are navigating both a high level of scrutiny and their own uncertain positions in the field, not yet fully professional but also not simply university students. Although incidents like that of Carly “Crunk Bear” McKinney, a teacher who lost her job after posting near-nude photos to her Twitter account (Ferner, 2013), appear fairly straightforward, the lines of appropriate online presence become more blurred in, for instance, the case of a Georgia teacher who was fired for posting a picture showing herself holding two alcoholic beverages on her
Veletsianos (2014) notes that pre-service teachers will often share what he terms an “acceptable identity fragment;” while the future teachers still see such identities as “authentic,” they are “intentionally limited and structured” to present a particular impression (para. 5). (Of course, beyond the identity management that is apparent in the study, it is interesting to note the language in use - there seems to be a belief in a stable and unitary identity in both on- and offline spaces, from which one can choose to display particular elements). Such instances raise the question of public versus private lives and make it clear that the two, like our online and offline identities, cannot be easily separated.

3.3 The Construction of the Teacher-Subject

As I have described above, there are many complexities and unique challenges associated with digital identity, and understanding these concerns is a necessary piece of the puzzle underlying my research questions. In addition to this, however, it is also critical to comprehend the ways in which teachers are constituted as subjects.

In *Practice Makes Practice: A Critical Study of Learning to Teach*, Britzman (1991) begins with Willard Waller’s thought-provoking question: “‘What does teaching do to teachers?’” (p. 1) in order to open up a “dialogic discourse” about the discursive practices that shape and constitute teachers and their teaching work. She argues that this question is particularly applicable in teacher education programs, as this is where “one first confronts the multiple meanings, constraints, and possibilities of the teacher’s identity in the process of constructing one’s own” (p. 2). She wonders what the process of
learning to teach does to teachers and how this construction of a teacher identity affects what is possible and imaginable in the classroom.

Discourse produces particular identity categories which we can choose to take up, recognizing that the desire to take up particular discursive productions of the self is already itself produced by discourse and that the act of taking up particular discourses has value for the subject (Hollway, 1998; Walkerdine, 1998). Just as the female subject can choose to take up various versions of “womanhood,” then, pre-service teachers take on a particular view of what it means to be a “good” teacher from the discourses presented to them (Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2010). In order to better understand the way that pre-service teachers think and speak about teaching and those acts related to their practice, it is critical to understand the ways in which they have been produced to desire to take up particular teacher-self positionings.

Britzman (1991), taking up Bakhtin, notes that student teachers must negotiate the boundaries between authoritative (or normative) discourses, that already carry the weight of authority and make up “‘received’ and static knowledge” (p. 20), and internally persuasive discourses, that is, those discourses without privilege, made up of subversive or “renegade” knowledge that is unsanctioned by normative discourses (p. 21). However, pre-service teachers are frequently “summoned” by prevailing cultural myths and normative discourses of teaching because these discourses allow them to be named and subjectivated as “good” teachers; such normative discourses include the ideas that everything depends on the teacher, the idea of teacher as expert, and the notion that teachers are self-made (Britzman, 1991, p. 223-230). Amidst these powerful normative discourses, it can be difficult, almost impossible, for pre-service teachers to give credit to
internally persuasive discourses, especially given another prevalent discourse of the teacher as neutral, which “expects teachers to shed their subjectivity to assume an objective persona” (Britzman, 1991, p. 25). Thus, when examining discourses of the “good” teacher, it is equally important to note how the effects of power shape what is not able to be said and what is silenced in the speech of pre-service teachers (Britzman, 1991).

3.3.1 The “Good” Teacher as Neutral and Value-Free

Perhaps one of the most relevant discourses is the way in which pre-service teachers are produced as politically neutral (particularly by technical-rational discourses, which also conceive of knowledge as neutral (Britzman, 1991)); this discourse becomes particularly problematic as it bumps up against many of the themes of anti-oppressive education and is therefore worthy of a detailed exploration. Kumashiro (2009) notes that “oppression often plays out unrecognized and unchallenged in schools because it has successfully convinced us that schools are neutral” (p. xxxvi). Rather, normative discourses of the “good” teacher do not include the idea of challenging oppressive practices in schools but are instead based in the idea of teacher neutrality; thus, teacher education unknowingly or unwittingly contributes to oppression in schools by constructing the good teacher as neutral.

Britzman (1991) argues that in many traditional teacher education programs, “the taking up of an identity means suppressing aspects of the self” (p. 4). In outlining her research with pre-service educators, Britzman notes that these individuals frequently neglect to mention particular categories of identity when examining their own
experiences (a phenomenon that we observe each semester in the curriculum class at this institution). For instance, pre-service teachers typically only identify their racial positioning when it is outside the norm, with many White pre-service teachers identifying as “raceless” (Rezai-Rashti & Solomon, 2008); Britzman makes the argument that those who are positioned as dominant are unable to locate their identities as raced. Class, too, is often left out of students’ positioning because they have taken up the dominant discourse of class as a non-determinant: that is, that class is something that can be overcome with enough hard work and is therefore not worth mentioning. Like class, gender is also frequently minimized in pre-service teachers’ explorations of their identities due to the perception that this “deficit” category can be overcome through individual determinism. Essentially, then, the future teachers in Britzman’s research have taken up dominant discourse to the extent that they are no longer able to see markers such as race, class, and gender as categories that determine privilege and marginalization, choosing instead to believe in the myth of meritocracy. By positioning themselves as neutral, they have bought into the myth that “teachers are also supposed to ‘shed’ their own social casings and personal preferences, [which] uphold[s] the discourse of objectivity that beckons individuals as if they could leave behind the social meanings they already embody” (Britzman, 1991, p. 235). Again, such positioning is counter-productive to anti-oppressive education as it makes it easy to place the blame for marginalization on the marginalized individuals themselves, rather than acknowledging the systems of oppression at work in society.

Interestingly, tension surrounding this perception of the good teacher as politically neutral is the very same tension that inspired this research in the first place,
and it is one that I struggle with myself each time I post to my Twitter account or write on my blog. I am reminded of a conversation about blogging on controversial topics that I had – on Twitter – with Dr. Alec Couros, a professor of educational technology and media. After encountering some resistance from my students about posting online, I put the question out to my PLN: Why should pre-service teachers be blogging? Many answers flowed in, and at some point, the discussion turned to what content should be made public and what should be kept private:

Dr. Couros’ last tweet is worth noting, I believe. What is considered controversial is always relative to the position of the individual – a person’s power and privilege determines the degree to which they can speak out against dominant narratives without negative fallout. When I struggle to post online, I need to be mindful of my own privilege, which is perhaps limited in academia but is quite significant relative to that of many other people. For students, it is important to consider how the balance of power and vulnerability plays out with respect to anti-oppressive education and how this tension
increases and shifts as we move into discussions of enacting social justice in open, online spaces.

### 3.3.2 The “Good” Teacher as Expert

Another myth positions the teacher as the expert, despite the fact that learning to teach is always a process of becoming (Britzman, 1991). This is problematic as it precludes Kumashiro’s (2009) argument that knowledge is always partial. Moreover, it leads pre-service teachers to seek out the “right” answer to pedagogical challenges, even as they simultaneously buy into the discourse of differentiation and the importance of creating “critical thinkers” in their classrooms. Along these lines, Britzman (1991) notices how pre-service teachers want to be provided with “concrete things” to learn in order to be experts (p. 201); “Student teachers learn that the intent to change neither brings about effective transformative practice nor allows them unilaterally to take up the existing practices,” therefore, in search of comfort, they look for concrete strategies (p. 212). In the curriculum class at this institution, my co-instructor and I began to use the term “#useful” to denote these concrete strategies; though the practice began as a joke, it soon became part of our everyday practice as we witnessed students taking the same comfort in these strategies as is described by Britzman.

Moore (2004) notes that much of the discourse of the “good” teacher centres on one’s ability to perform particular competencies, such as management, planning, and instruction, or to be reflective about one’s practice. Interestingly, Moore found that such discourses could backfire, subverting their own purposes; for instance, Moore found that, rather than being actually reflective, some teachers performed (that is, faked) ritualistic or
pseudo-reflection according to someone else’s framework in order to fit into what Britzman (1991) refers to as the authoritative discourse.

### 3.3.3 Caring and Kind: Other Discourses of the “Good” Teacher

Although technical-rational discourses produce the “good” teacher as a neutral, a-political entity, other discourses tell particular stories about the kind of personality the neutral teacher should enact. Britzman (1991) notes that the many stereotypical images of teachers, in the media and in our collective understanding, lead to the essentializing of what a teacher is or should be. The stereotypes held up in culture (in discourse) become part of the narrative of teaching that student-teachers apply as they become teachers. These stereotypes are troublesome in that they present the fiction of a unitary, static identity and also often “subvert a critical discourse about the lived contradictions of teaching and the actual struggles of teachers and students” (p. 5). For instance, Britzman notes that the stereotype of the “good” teacher as eternally giving contradicts unionization and makes it easy for politicians to critique the character of teachers when they engage in strike actions. Moreover, Davies (2006) notes that any discourse can constrain the ways in which we are able to imagine ourselves; for instance, she gives the example of a syllabus that set out as a goal for the class the creation of the students as informed citizens; while such a goal is outwardly liberating for students, it also simultaneously “shapes the conditions of possibility available to school students” (p. 430) so that they must perform in particular ways to be successful.

Britzman (1991) adds that, given the long-standing feminization of the teaching profession, such stereotypes are often gendered and sexist: “Like the ‘good’ woman, the
‘good’ teacher is positioned as self-sacrificing, kind, overworked, underpaid, and holding an unlimited reservoir of patience” (p. 5). Frequently, female teachers are viewed as either martyrs or idiots, while male teachers must project a tough-guy image in the classroom to be respected.

Other popular discourses see the “good” teacher as charismatic and caring (Moore, 2004). Such discourses are particularly evident and reinforced in popular culture. For instance, movies such as Dangerous Minds and Freedom Writers present pre-service teachers with the myth that it is enough to be kind-hearted and good-intentioned, and moreover, that acting in such ways will lead to the salvation of marginalized students (as is satirized in the MADtv skit, “Nice White Lady” (Klaustrophobic, 2007)). Once again, this discourse leads to an essentialization of the teacher-self that can be difficult to reconcile with the realities of teaching; moreover, such a discourse is rife with colonial overtones and suggests that the right attitude is enough to combat oppression.

Along these lines, it is important to note the way in which the “good” teacher is often tied to the idea of Whiteness. The films mentioned above, as well as myriad others, conflate the narrative of the “good” teacher with that of the white saviour. Dr. Chris Emdin, of Columbia University, describes this conflation as “a savior complex that gives mostly white teachers in minority and urban communities a false sense of saving kids” (Downs, 2016, para. 2); he notes the parallels between current models of urban education and past schools for Indigenous students (akin to Canada’s residential schools) in that both aim to assimilate students into White culture. While the dangers of these models of education could be the subject of a dissertation in themselves, it is important to notice how the combination of the narrative of the White saviour with that of the “good” teacher
can add an additional barrier for White students in the process of recognizing their own complicity in White privilege and structural racism; in their paper titled “I Can’t Be Racist — I Teach in an Urban School, and I’m a Nice White Lady,” Miller and Harris (2018) discuss the ways in which White educators often fail to address their own participation in racist society, thanks to their belief that they are making a difference in the world. Pre-service teachers in our faculty, who are certainly not immune to socialization in popular culture, may well have internalized the white saviour narrative, further cementing their own desire to live up to the narrative of the “good” teacher as caring and compassionate (and therefore White).

Finally, Kumashiro (2009) notes that teacher education programs often fall into one of three categories when presenting an image of the “good” teacher: teacher as learned practitioner, teacher as researcher, or teacher as professional. Each tells a particular story of teaching; for instance, those programs that stress “teacher as learned practitioner” focus on knowledge of child development, of the content area, and of methods of teaching. However, as with other discourses, Kumashiro notes that each image of the teacher can be a barrier to anti-oppressive education if it is taken to an extreme; the idea of “teacher as professional” is perhaps especially problematic in that national or regional standards for what it means to be a good teacher imply that the good teacher is a one-size-fits-all model. Instead of buying into a particular discourse, Kumashiro argues that there is a “need to problematize any effort to predetermine what it means to be a ‘good’ teacher” (p. 14-15) in order to avoid the tendency towards essentializing identity.
Importantly, Moore (2004) reminds us that the idea of the good teacher is constantly shifting according to political climate, so that, for instance, in a climate of accountability, good teachers are those who post gains in student achievement (recently, this discourse has been reinforced in the United States by the allocation of Race to the Top funding for states that tie teacher evaluation and/or pay to student achievement). This means that, despite discourses that would lead us to believe otherwise, the idea of the good teacher cannot be a universal signifier: it is always tied to its own historicity.

### 3.3.4 Pre-service Teachers’ Resistances to Difficult Knowledge

Britzman (1991) notes that traditional teacher education is focused on such elements as classroom management and delivering a prescribed curriculum, that is, on “the maintenance of [the existing] school structure” (p. 48). Up against this normative view of the role of the teacher, which was learned through 13000 hours of schooling and is frequently reinforced through methods classes that depict knowledge as “an accomplished fact” (p. 47), it is hardly surprising that pre-service teachers are (consciously or not) resistant to the ideas of anti-oppressive education, which ask them to question both the construction of knowledge in society and the ways in which they have been unknowingly complicit in this construction. Closer examination of the resistances typically demonstrated, however, indicates that such resistances are inextricably bound up in the ways in which pre-service educators have been discursively produced to perform particular versions of the “good” teacher.

First, it is helpful to clarify what exactly is meant by difficult or troubling knowledge. Here, I am referring to knowledge that causes discomfort, disrupts common
sense ways of viewing the world, and problematizes dominant narratives (Kumashiro, 2009). In the context of anti-oppressive education, this knowledge might include learning about systemic racism or about White privilege, or confronting the ways in which schooling is potentially, and frequently, oppressive to marginalized groups.

3.3.5 Patterns of Resistance

Discourses that shape the “good” teacher as neutral bump up violently against the suggestion that teachers unknowingly perpetuate racism in classrooms and in society; as I mentioned briefly in Chapter 1, particular patterns of resistance often arise when students are confronted with “uncomfortable” knowledge. Montgomery (2013) writes about the process of getting the students in his teacher education class to examine issues of privilege and oppression; he notes that:

this period in the course [was] filled with destabilization, exhaustion, frustration, and even a percolating anger among some students who often give the impression that they are being compelled to learn something that is either of little relevance to their lives or unduly disrespectful of the good people they understand themselves to be. (Montgomery, 2013, p. 7)

As I described in Chapter 2, the resistances demonstrated by pre-service teachers often take predictable forms: ideological incongruence, that is, a difficulty in holding two opposing beliefs, such as White privilege vs. meritocracy; liberalist notions of individualism and meritocracy, that is, pointing out examples of minoritized individuals who did well as evidence of the necessity of simply working hard; and the negation of White capital, that is, showing how White privilege does not really exist (Solomon et al.,
Montgomery (2013) adds that students resist troubling knowledge in ways that “protect their personal and racialized identity and the hegemonic domination that empowers them” (p. 10). Thus, they often draw on discourses of colour-blindness, which allow them to locate racism in the individual rather than in larger societal structures. Indeed, Henriques (1998) notes that the “rotten apple theory” of racism, which ascribes racism to aberrant individuals, allows us to avoid looking at larger power imbalances and instead continue to reap the benefits of the privilege that these imbalances bestow.

Picower (2009) references the “tools of whiteness” (p. 204) that help White pre-service teachers to maintain their positioning in discourse. For instance, she notes that the defenses “I never owned a slave,” and “Stop trying to make me feel guilty” (that is, denying guilt because they would be admitting responsibility if they did not do so), the defense that there is currently equality and thus the topic is no longer relevant, and the defense of buying into the aforementioned discourse of colour-blindness are all used to maintain a discourse of White innocence (p. 205-211). Each of these defenses prevents pre-service teachers from having to confront the discomfort of their own complicity.

### 3.3.6 Cognitive Dissonance and Other Discursive Incongruities

Resistance to difficult or troubling knowledge often occurs due to an incompatibility with existing discursive positions, so that new, disruptive knowledge cannot be reconciled with material interactions with the world. Such an incompatibility is difficult to reconcile for subjects who have been discursively produced to see themselves as fixed and unitary individuals; indeed, “much is . . . invested in our recognition of ourselves as unitary, whole, non-contradictory, mature, rational” (Henriques et al., 1998,
p. 225), so that resistance to discursive incongruities can lead us to go against what we feel is right. For instance, LeCourt (2004) shares the story of a student whose critical understandings were in opposition with her religious beliefs; in the end, it was easier for this student to “reject outright the critical insights she still felt were ‘right’” because accepting them made it impossible to continue with her existing life (p. 4).

The construction of the “good” teacher as neutral can lead to additional resistances to difficult knowledge. As I alluded to in Chapter 1, the discourse of the value-free teacher makes it nearly impossible for pre-service teachers to accept the possibility of their own racism, “so that the fear of tarnishing one’s reputation displaces concerns with acting against racism. . . . Often too, white teacher education candidates express a fear for their own safety or career if they were to take up what they deem to be such ‘controversial topics’ in the classroom” (Montgomery, 2013, p. 11). In a similar vein, van Dijk (1991) notes that denials of racism are an important re-inscription of the discourse of tolerance that is present in many contemporary Western cultures; the discourse of tolerance goes hand-in-hand with the idea that the “good” teacher should be neutral, and thus this denial on the part of pre-service teachers makes sense in that it reinforces their discursive positioning.

Other dominant discourses of the “good” teacher play into pre-service teachers’ resistances to troubling knowledge as well. For instance, buying into the discourse of the “good” teacher as caring (Moore, 2004), pre-service teachers resist the idea that it is their responsibility to do something about racism (because they cannot both be caring and fail to act against oppressive practices) (Picower, 2009). Moreover, the image of the “good” teacher as charismatic (Moore, 2004) surfaces as these future educators use the defense of
just wanting to help students of colour; while this resistance perpetuates the discourse of other races as deficient or in need of the assistance of the White colonizer, it also allows them to “reaffirm [their] identit[ies] as a good charitable person” (Picower, 2009, p. 210).

The typical resistances demonstrated by pre-service teachers when learning about difficult knowledge, then, are very much bound up in the ways in which they have taken up particular discursive constructions of the “good” teacher. Indeed, if students wish to become subjects of the discourse of the “good” teacher (a desire which is itself discursively produced), it is nearly impossible for them to acknowledge alternative discourses about racism and privilege that run counter to the dominant narratives. Thus, if we aim towards anti-oppressive education, it seems particularly critical to begin by helping students to deconstruct the normative discourses that shape them and that reify and reinscribe privilege and marginalization.

A post-structural understanding of the subject provides a critical re-imagining of the modernist view of identity as fixed, unitary, and pre-given. Such a conception of the subject, based, in turn, in post-structural views of power, knowledge, and discourse, allows us to begin to deconstruct and then reconstruct the frequently oppressive binaries that underpin a modernist ontology, thus opening a space to reimagine the dominant discourses that serve to segregate, privilege/marginalize, and uphold the status quo. This deconstruction is especially critical for those in the field of education; by engaging pre-service teachers in the work of understanding their own discursive production, as well as how this production shapes their unknowing complicity in systems of oppression, we might begin to reimagine an educational system that works towards a more equitable society instead of merely reproducing the status quo.
3.4 Social Media and Social Justice/Equity

A final area of examination is the intersection of digital identity and social justice work. Research into online participation suggests some initial possibilities offered by this crossroads; for instance, participation in online communities correlates to participation in social causes (Kozinets, 2010), with eighty-seven percent of those who participated in online communities saying that they had begun to participate in new causes since becoming members of digital communities. Moreover, Papacharissi (2010), in her work on how new media shape democracy and civic engagement, suggests that many citizens have moved away from formal, public, and traditional methods of political activity, instead turning to private spheres such as social networks, “new spaces, upon which newer, more empowering habits and relations may be cultivated” (p. 15). Interestingly, Cross (2011) notes that it is often easier to say mean things to others online through the additional layer of the computer screen; while this seems on the surface like a negative characteristic of digital spaces, perhaps we might translate the possibilities afforded by the layer of “digital disguise” (Cross, 2011, p. 133) to other contexts, allowing us to move outside our comfort zones to challenge others in productive ways.

Additionally, Papacharissi (2012) notes that social networks like Twitter (which, interestingly, is more diverse than the US population on the whole) may allow for greater attention to marginalized voices. By allowing for marginalized or non-dominant voices and ideas to be heard, social media can also help to make difficult knowledge more accessible to the mainstream; it allows articles (such as, for example, an article by Clifton, 2014) and even cartoons (for instance, Robot Hugs’ (2014) comic about White
privilege) to circulate among wider audiences than might read works by Kevin Kumashiro or Tim Wise, *inter alia*, and provides a more accessible explanation of, for instance, why colour blind discourses are so problematic (as Clifton does succinctly and in easy-to-understand language). Trending hashtags such as #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, and #YesAllWomen, while not without their own issues, can also raise awareness about difficult knowledge and open spaces for conversations that allow for the input of multiple voices. Indeed, given the many critiques of post-structuralism for using academic language that reinscribes the power/knowledge associations that it seeks to at least deconstruct, if not subvert, social networks and digital spaces have provided the channels for ideas such as unseen privilege and discourse to become readable and accessible to a wider segment of the population. It is important, then, that pre-service teachers are able to position themselves, through their digital identities, to carry out the work of anti-oppressive education in the spaces where more and more of their future students live large portions of their lives.

Theories of digital identity are constantly shifting and evolving as our world changes with the continuing explosion of digital culture. In the midst of shifting cultures, however, the prevalence of technologies and the ubiquity of media is apparent. Given this prevalence, it is important that we consider how the work of anti-oppressive education will fit into these new spaces, and we must recognize that this intersection may take some work to get right. In this brave new world, Turkle (2012a) argues that we are increasingly unable to connect in positive ways using technology and that connection leaves us more alone than ever. Perhaps, though, as Madison (2012) notes, if the online world is indeed a new world, then we must learn new ways of relating and connecting in it through positive
means. We cannot assume that pre-service teachers, or their future students, are astute, able users of technology simply by dint of the year of their birth. Rather, as teacher educators, we must work alongside our students to explore new ways to connect and to exist online, ways that allow us to participate in positive ways and to utilize the special affordances of online networks to connect with each other to support anti-oppressive education and work towards social justice.

In this chapter, I have provided an overview of the relevant literature in a number of areas that pertain to my research. Below, I turn to the execution of the research itself, beginning with an explanation of the process of data collection.
Chapter 4: Data Collection

4.1 First Steps: Attending to Ethics

In accordance with university policy, the first step in conducting my research was to secure ethics approval from the Research Ethics Board. In doing so, I needed to attend to various issues related to the particular research that I hoped to undertake, which I detail below.

4.1.1 Conceptualizing Research in a Digital Context

boyd (2008a) notes that there is a long history of ethnographic research in online spaces, including early studies of things like IRC (Internet Relay Chat) and Usenet. There is, however, a great deal of disagreement on what one should call this type of research. Wikipedia, for instance (which is often a helpful marker of cultural understanding), includes a page for “online ethnography” but notes that “virtual ethnography” and other terms are often used, and then goes on in the same page to term it “Netnography” (which, confusingly, has its own page) for the remainder of the article (Online ethnography, 2014; Netnography, 2014). Hine (2000), whose work is often cited by later writers, refers to ethnography of online spaces as “virtual ethnography,” noting that such ethnography is not just of virtual spaces but also takes places in virtual spaces (at least partially) and is made possible through virtual communications and contexts. Kozinets (2010), meanwhile, notes that the term “netnography” has become popular in consumer and marketing research. He describes netnography as “a specialized form of ethnography adapted to the unique computer-mediated contingencies of today’s social worlds” (p. 1), although his use of “computer-mediated” seems outdated given the prevalence of
smartphones and tablets (instead, I use the term digitally mediated to denote interactions that take place in online spaces).

Those who advocate for the specific labelling of ethnographic research in online spaces (through terms such as “virtual” or “online”) tend to make the case for digital spaces as cultures of their own, with many making the argument that the Internet and digitally mediated communications have changed the ways in which we interact (as I described in Chapter 1 above) and are therefore worthy of exploration as cultural spaces in their own right. In fact, given the prevalence of technology in our society, Kozinets (2010) argues that any present-day ethnography should necessarily include an examination of a culture’s digital components. He argues that “cyberspace is a distinct type of culture” (p. 11), wherein participants in digital communities develop unique codes of meaning and norms that guide interaction and communication, similarly to offline groups, but wherein some of the features of online spaces, such as the ability to remain anonymous, can shape interactions in particular ways. Indeed, boyd (2008a) contends that social networks in particular are networked publics, that is “publics [collections of people with some element of common understanding or identity] that are restructured by networked technologies; they are simultaneously a space and a collection of people” (p. 41), thus marking them as cultural spaces of their own. Kozinets (2010) also notes that, from very early on, online gathering places have largely been seen as a type of community (though in the early years of the web there was some disagreement on this due to the disconnected nature of online conversation at the time).

Part of the difficulty in conceptualizing research in online spaces is, as boyd (2008b) notes, that there is still a good deal of disagreement related to the relationship
between on- and offline spaces. Hine (2000), for instance, sees a tension between those who view the Internet as its own culture and those who see it simply as a cultural artefact. Therefore, Hine argues that ethnography should take place in both digitally mediated contexts and the other contexts that surround this context, while Kozinets (2011) notes that it is helpful to look at on- and offline spaces and to take into account what he refers to as the “intermix,” that is, the blending of on- and offline worlds (as I described in greater detail in Chapter Three above.) boyd (2008b), when discussing a study of Second Life, a virtual world, stresses the importance of looking at cultures as not existing in isolation: she writes: “I failed to understand how a community that explicitly defined itself as people’s second lives could be examined without attention to those people’s ‘first’ lives” (p. 52).

Stewart (2013) argues that there are no fundamental changes required to conduct an ethnography in a digital community, since ethnographies are necessarily adaptable and must be framed to fit their particular context even in offline circumstances. Indeed, though Kozinets (2010) uses the term netnography, he notes that such a designation is entirely optional, as ethnography is “already known as a flexible and adaptable approach” (p. 5).

It was because of this context that I ultimately chose not to append a signifier of “digital-ness” to my work (e.g., labelling it as a digital ethnography), as such a signifier is not, at this point, entirely agreed upon and is perhaps more likely to cause confusion. Additionally, I felt that marking my research as such contradicted my aforementioned belief that the notion of “digital dualism” is, in fact, a fallacious binary.
4.1.2 Ethical Challenges of Conducting Research in Online Spaces

Although I rejected the labelling of my research as “digital” for the above reasons, it should be noted that conducting research in online contexts does present particular challenges and complexities. Kozinets (2010), for instance, notes that the process of entering a digital community is often quite different from that of entering a physical locale, given that it is often possible to enter and observe online communities while remaining unseen and/or anonymous. As well, ethical issues around participant observation and data collection can become murky and complicated when dealing with information that is frequently public (but not publicized) to begin with.

Kozinets (2010) notes that the way in which we conceptualize the Internet affects how we might think about ethical use of its contents. If the Internet is a public place, then we might treat it similarly to a public place in the offline world, in which there is limited expectation of privacy (for instance, if I overhear a conversation in a public place, I can report it without any ethical concerns). If, however, we conceive of the Internet as text, then we are left with an ethical responsibility to give credit to the source of quotations.

Research that gathers and analyzes publicly available data is not considered human subject data, so long as the identity of the individuals involved is not recorded in the data collection process (Kozinets, 2010). Of course, in light of the emergence of the Facebook study (Meyer, 2014) in which researchers manipulated users’ emotions through alterations to their timeline feeds and then recorded users’ subsequent posts, public perception of the ethics of such research is highly negative (despite the fact that Facebook’s user agreements do give the company the ability to conduct research on
members). Moreover, “public” is often not conceived of as synonymous with “publicized,” as became apparent, for instance, when Buzzfeed publicized a list of tweeted responses to a post asking what people were wearing when they were raped (Larson, 2014). Larson notes: “The legality is cut and dry—yes, publications can embed your public tweets. Whether or not they should is another question entirely” (n.p.).

Kozinets (2010) notes that additional precautions regarding anonymity should be in place when the participants or community members are public figures whose reputations may be damaged by publicizing their interactions. This is perhaps also the case for pre-service teachers, given the general perception, and indeed, legal precedent (see Ontario College of Teachers, 2011) that teachers are public figures. Moreover, as students, pre-service teachers might also be considered a vulnerable population.

Given these complexities, one of the instructors assigned to the ECS210 class during the time that I was conducting my research expressed concerns about my proposed use of publicly available blog posts or tweets created by students and related to course activities. The instructor raised the possibility that students whose work I included (particularly in cases where I might be using students’ materials to point to problematic statements related to social justice and/or anti-oppressive education) might then be identified through a simple Internet search and that the tweets or blog posts I quoted from could prove damaging to the pre-service teachers’ professional identities.

In response to these concerns, I contacted the university’s Research Ethics Board and detailed the situation, and the board subsequently decided that the material was publicly available and therefore acceptable to include in my research. However, I ultimately opted not to use this observational data in my research, partly due to the
aforementioned quality and quantity of the interview data, and also partly due to my own uncertainty about the use of the observational data. In particular, I struggled with my dual role of both educator and researcher; Marx (2006) notes that “Teacher-researchers have the double responsibility of being ethical teachers and ethical researchers simultaneously” (p. 28). Many of the participants were former students, and others were likely to be my students in the future. This dual position was an important element to attend to; while I did not select any current students as participants, as a teacher-educator I still felt that I had a responsibility to act as a teacher first and researcher second.

4.1.3 Ethical Challenges Related to Critical Ethnographic Research

It is important to attend to ethical considerations when working with others and their stories; indeed, Coles (1989) writes: “Their story, yours, mine, it’s what we all carry with us on this trip we take, and we owe it to each other to respect our stories and learn from them” (p. 30). Connelly and Clandinin (2006) add that “inquirers must deepen the sense of what it means to live in relation in an ethical way…from start to finish: at the outset as ends-in-view are imagined; as inquirer-participant relationships unfold, and as participants are represented in research texts” (p. 483). However, Madison (2012) notes that ethics are especially important in critical ethnography given its aim of emancipation and empowerment. For example, Britzman (1991) notes that ethnographers must participate in their participants’ lives in empathetic ways and acknowledge the power they hold to represent participants’ experiences in particular ways. They must be cautious to avoid doing harm to their participants, which may occur due to guilt or stress during the collection of data; participants may struggle with or be embarrassed by some of the...
things that they share (Murphy & Dingwall, 2001). Indeed, taking a critical approach to ethnography makes this possibility all the more likely; in my case, since part of the intent of my research was to help participants become more aware of the ways in which they have been constructed as teachers, this task required participants to come to terms with troubling knowledge. Despite my own (and the faculty’s) good intentions for anti-oppressive education, Murphy and Dingwall (2001) note that “we cannot assume that increased self-knowledge is necessarily a benefit for all research participants in all circumstances” (p. 340), and certainly, even if the participants, or more generally the pre-service teachers in our program, eventually benefit from the troubling knowledge they confront, it may initially (or for many years) cause a great deal of discomfort.

4.1.4 Ethical Challenges Related to Participant Voice

Butler-Kisber (2010) identifies the issue of participant voice as an important ethical concern when conducting qualitative research. She notes that “the issue of voice in inquiry is multifaceted and fraught with tension [and] requires vigilant and ethical attention to power and appropriation” (p. 21). Some theorists who take a “post” perspective call for researchers to allow participants to speak for themselves, without interpretation on the researcher’s part, as interpretation may be seen as a “new form of colonization” (Murphy & Dingwall, 2001, p. 345). In response, Marx (2006) emphasizes the need to check final reports with participants, although this may add additional complexities if participants disagree with the researcher’s interpretations. Britzman (1991) notes that voice is problematic because it is not singular and is always context dependent; also, language does not always express what we are trying to express.
Similarly, Murphy and Dingwall (2001) remind us that “we do not necessarily understand a phenomenon just because we have experienced it” (p. 345), which may be especially true when it comes to uncovering the hidden discursive practices that shaped our thoughts and actions. Indeed, Britzman (1991) argues that while we must avoid co-opting our participants’ voices, we also need to negotiate and uncover the ways in which participants’ understandings have been shaped by these hidden discourses:

To assume a critical voice, then, does not mean to destroy or devalue the struggles of others. Instead, a critical voice attempts the delicate and discursive work of rearticulating the tensions between and within words and practices, or constraints and possibilities, as it questions the consequences of the taken-for-granted knowledge shaping responses to everyday life and the meanings fashioned from them. (p. 13)

Lather (2001), too, reminds us that privileging the voice of the participant runs the risk of falling into the modernist trap of the “romance of the speaking subject” who is entirely self-aware, fixed, and unitary (p. 483). Thus, I needed to negotiate this complexity in an ethical way, dependent on context; in particular, I found myself relying heavily on the strategy of including original field data and quotations in the final research in order to make the process of analysis open and transparent (Murphy & Dingwall, 2001).

4.2 Participants Recruitment and Selection

After receiving ethics approval, I began the process of recruiting students to participate in the research. Because I was interested in students’ digital identities as they intersected with the “troubling” content of the ECS210 course, I decided to target my
recruitment efforts on this class. Specifically, I focused my recruitment on students who had taken ECS210 in the previous winter semester (when I was one of the co-instructors) as well as those who were enrolled in the current semester (the semester during which I undertook my research).

4.2.1 Power Relationships

As an instructor in the Faculty of Education, it was important for me to attend carefully to the potential issues of power dynamics and imbalances. In order to lessen the potential ethical conflicts, I opted not to teach the ECS210 class during the semester in which I completed my research. I also stipulated that any students who were enrolled in one of my classes during that semester would not be eligible to participate in my research. I arranged to have the faculty’s student services office send out a recruitment email on my behalf (Appendix A). This route was taken (rather than me sending out the emails myself) in order to decrease the likelihood that students (particularly those who knew me as an instructor) would feel undue pressure to participate in the research.

While the aforementioned steps were taken in order to minimize the effects of the power differential between me and the students (i.e., the research participants), there was, as mentioned above, the possibility that those students would be enrolled in my courses in the future. As such, the consent form (Appendix B) included the following line, “Please note that your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and will have no impact (either positive or negative) on your standing in any future classes you may take with the researcher or her supervisor.”
4.2.2 Participant Anonymity and Confidentiality

Given the potential risks to the participants (particularly with respect to their digital identities), I wanted to ensure that their identities were protected as much as possible. Thus, I planned to assign pseudonyms to all students, as well using a pseudonym for the name of the institution. Given the context of the study, however, it is likely that the university and thus the course may be deduced by readers; thus, this potential limit to confidentiality was made clear to participants. Ultimately, several of the research participants chose to be identified by their real names, and a few chose to speak publicly about their role in my research; I discuss this further in a later chapter.

Of course, Murphy and Dingwall (2001) note that even if a researcher goes to great lengths to ensure that her participants remain un-named to outsiders, they will still likely recognize themselves in the research and thus may be hurt or take offense to the things that the researcher writes about them. In uncovering potentially racist or otherwise oppressive discourses in pre-service teachers’ online sharing practices, my own research had the potential to offend my student participants. Consequently, participants were invited to read over drafts of the research, and every effort was made (throughout the interview process and in subsequent debriefing) to ensure that participants were comfortable with the final product (while also acknowledging that the work of anti-oppressive education often necessitates uncomfortable learnings along the way).

4.2.3 The Recruitment Process

I planned to select between four and seven participants, who would participate in between three and five one-hour interview sessions, with the number of interviews to be
determined jointly with each participant depending on their availability as well as my own judgement related to how much “data” was needed. The number of participants (between four and seven) was chosen in order to provide a range of responses while ensuring that the volume of interview data collected would remain manageable.

Ultimately, I received expressions of interest from thirteen students. In order to facilitate the selection of the ultimate participants, I responded to each of the volunteers to ask why they were interested in participating in the research. Student responses to these questions included: a desire to develop proficiency in the area of educational technology; having conflicting feelings about the role of blogging in anti-oppressive education courses and a desire to explore this uncertainty; and a desire (espoused by those who were former students of mine) to help me out with my research. In sum, the volunteers generally fit into one or more of three main groups: those who knew me from previous courses; those who felt passionate about anti-oppressive education; and those who wanted to learn more about either blogging or anti-oppressive education. While most of the volunteers were current education students in their second or third years, one student was a former education student who had subsequently transferred into another faculty.

Given that the principal aim of qualitative research does not align with quantitative notions of generalizability (see, for instance, Denzin, 1997; Kozinets, 2010; and Thomas, 1993), my process of selecting participants was not intended to ensure a representative sample but rather to elicit a variety of responses from which to glean insight. For this reason, I ultimately chose to select students who either expressed a deep commitment to anti-oppressive education or who had strong feelings (both for and
against) the idea of public blogging about anti-oppressive course content. I chose not to include those who were looking to improve their understanding of educational technology, as this was not the goal of the research. Additionally, I opted not to choose participants whose main motivation was to assist me with my research (despite appreciating the sentiment). I also ultimately decided not to select the volunteer who was a former education student; while this would have provided an interesting outside perspective on education courses, it did not seem to be aligned to my aim of better understanding how to support education students in their discussions of anti-oppressive content in online spaces.

I sent the following notes to those who had volunteered to take part in the research process:

Non-selected volunteers:

Because I received expressions of interest in my research from more than seven students, I selected seven students to take part in the research. Unfortunately, you were not one of those selected. Thank you so much for volunteering, and I am still happy to chat with you about this anytime!

Thanks again for your interest!

-Katia

Selected volunteers:

Because I received expressions of interest in my research from more than seven students, I selected seven students to take part in the research. You were one of
the students chosen. I have included the consent form so that you can review it - we will go over it together at the first interview. If you are still interested in taking part in the research, please let me know as soon as possible so that we can schedule the first interview. I hope to do some interviews this semester and finish them up in January/February of next year.

Thanks again for your interest!

-Katia

Ultimately, the demographics of my group of participants ended up mirroring the makeup of our faculty in many ways. As I noted earlier, the Faculty of Education is made up predominantly of White, cisgender females; the majority of students are direct-entry, but there are also a number of mature students in the faculty, some of whom have previous degrees and are enrolled in the two-year Bachelor of Education After Degree (or BEAD) program. The participants selected included four cisgender females, two cisgender males, and one gender queer individual. All of the participants identified as White, and most were in their early twenties, but the age range at the start of the research spanned from 19 to 35 years. While two participants were mature students, none were enrolled in the after-degree program, but this was in part due to the fact that the ECS210 course was not one of the required courses for that program, and hence there were only occasional after-degree students who took the class as an elective.

In retrospect, choosing seven participants, and conducting four to five hour-long interviews with each, generated a somewhat unmanageable volume of data; at the same time, however, all of the interviews were useful and interesting, and each interviewee
added a different dimension to the research. Additionally, by the end of the interview sessions, I noticed that conversations had become very comfortable and even quite enjoyable. Shortly after concluding the interview process, I wrote the following in a blog post (Hildebrandt, 2015):

Last week, I finally finished my research interviews. Yay…I think?

Qualitative research is a funny thing. After spending 4 or 5 hours with each of these students, I feel that I’ve gotten to know them pretty well. Over the past few months, I have been constantly overwhelmed by research participants’ incredible insights and the amazing generosity they have shown with their time, meeting with me in the midst of their busy semesters. And now that it’s over, I feel a little lost and wish I could keep having these conversations (and I do have them, sometimes, but there’s something about that sacred time designated to nothing but the interviews).

While the process of conducting this number of interviews was time-consuming, from my perspective as an anti-oppressive educator, I believe that all of the interview conversations were beneficial both to the student participants and to me as they led to important, critical conversations; as well, I believe that the depth of relationship afforded by the number of interviews was beneficial in that this relationship made it easier for the
participants to engage deeply in the sometimes uncomfortable conversation topics. Below, I continue to outline the methods I employed in my research: I describe the interview, data collection, and data analysis processes.

4.3 The Interview Process

The student interviews took place predominantly during the Fall 2014 semester, as well as during the first few weeks of the Winter 2015 semester. Two of my interview participants ultimately ended up enrolling in one of my courses during the Winter 2015 semester, so for these students, I made sure to complete the interview process during the Fall 2014 semester.

4.3.1 Data Collection

I recorded student interviews using an audio recording device. This device (and the data on it) was stored in a locked filing cabinet, and I also backed up the data after each interview on my laptop, which is password protected and kept either on my person or in a locked location. I was the only person who had access to the raw data. Throughout the interview process, I made sure to write field notes as soon as possible after each meeting, “since the quantity of information forgotten is very slight over a short period of time but accelerates quickly as more time passes” (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011, p. 188). The goal here was to reflect on the interviews in such a way that the notes would “be full enough adequately to summon up for one again, months later, a reasonably vivid picture of any described event” (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011, p. 188).
4.3.2 Interview Structure

As mentioned above, in planning out my interview process, I drew in part from Marx’s (2006) work with White pre-service teachers, which loosely entailed an initial discussion of participants’ backgrounds and contexts in order to develop an overall sense of the discourses and events that shaped their worldviews and understanding of themselves and others. Indeed, one of the participants, who had been reading Marx’s (2006) book upon my suggestion, noted immediately that I was drawing on these methods. In my blog, I noted the following about the structure and intent of these initial interviews:

This first round of conversations was geared towards developing biographical profiles of my participants. . . . Because my research is about the ways that anti-oppressive education intersects with digital identity and digital spaces, these conversations delved into what Kevin Kumashiro terms “troubling knowledge” in his book Against Common Sense. We explored students’ childhoods, experiences with racism, feelings about the social justice-oriented curriculum in our Faculty of Education, and thoughts about teaching as a profession. (Hildebrandt, 2015)

In planning my research, I opted to use a semi-structured interview process (Schram, 2003) to guide my initial interviews, leaving the later interviews more open. A list of potential interview questions is included in Appendix C. Charmaz (2014) notes the importance of creating a loose interview plan, writing:

Constructing an interview guide prepares you to conduct the actual interview.

When you grapple with creating, revising, and fine tuning your interview questions, you gain a better grasp of how and when to ask them in a conversation.
You will keep in mind how to form well-constructed questions although you might not follow your original questions or glance at your interview guide while conducting the interview. (p. 63)

Thus, for my first round of interviews, I planned questions related to participants’ backgrounds (as described above), while my second round of interviews consisted of any follow-up questions from the first interview, as well as questions related to participants’ social media habits.

After the first few rounds of interviews, I found myself drawing on the constant comparative method of analysis first developed by Glaser and Strauss (Charmaz, 2014) in order to begin to understand the themes that arose repeatedly in the interviews, so that I could return to these themes in later interviews to explore the topics more deeply, or so that I could see whether the themes I noted in one participant’s interview data resonated with other participants. While I at first wondered if this method amounted to me getting the participants to say what I wanted to hear, I reminded myself that the process of ethnographic fieldwork is "iterative, rather than linear" (Dutta, 2014, p. 95). Moreover, I soon realized that unpacking the dominant discourses with the participants was actually a powerful activity (as I describe further in Chapter 7), and that this unpacking was part of the critical (that is, action-oriented) dimension of my research.

4.4 Data Analysis

As I described in detail in Chapter 2 above, my research draws primarily on ethnography and critical discourse analysis. For reference, I returned to my research questions (listed in Chapter 1 above):
• **Question 1:** How do pre-service teachers understand the process of engaging with discomforting knowledge and “controversial” social justice-related topics in open, online spaces, and what are the perceived barriers to engaging with these issues via digital media?

• **Question 2:** How do dominant discourses around teaching, digital spaces, and identity, as well as the discursive production of pre-service teachers, contribute to perceived barriers to engaging with social justice-related topics in open, online spaces?

• **Question 3:** How might we better support students in becoming active anti-oppressive educators online?

Below, I describe the strategies that I drew on to make sense of what the participants were saying and to answer the three questions listed above.

### 4.4.1 Addressing Question 1: Ethnographic Analysis

The first question, *How do pre-service teachers understand the process of engaging with discomforting knowledge and “controversial” social justice-related topics in open, online spaces, and what are the perceived barriers to engaging with these issues via digital media?* is largely descriptive in nature and relates to students’ perceptions of the culture of digital worlds; thus, I set about answering it by looking at the data from an ethnographic, interpretive lens. In the spirit of ethnography (Frankham & MacRae, 2011), when analyzing the data I looked for patterns and themes in the ways that the participants discussed online spaces, including their own blogs, the course blog hubs, and other social networks. In particular, I noted how participants described their own present
contributions to digital spaces, what they identified as relevant differences between online spaces and face-to-face settings, and their experiences in engaging with controversial topics via digital platforms. I organized student responses according to the following themes:

- Participants’ digital identities and present use of social media
- Participants’ perceptions of digital identity and online spaces
- Participants’ current and past experiences of engaging with social justice issues in online spaces

I discuss these results, along with descriptions of each of the participants, in Chapter Five below. As well, I describe the perceived barriers to engaging with social justice online that stemmed from participants’ perceptions of the three themes listed above.

4.4.2 Addressing Question 2: Critical (Collaborative) Discourse Analysis

Having gathered some general impressions of the participants’ participation online and their concerns around engaging with controversial topics in digital spaces, I turned to my second question: How do dominant discourses around teaching, digital spaces, and identity, as well as the discursive production of pre-service teachers, contribute to perceived barriers to engaging with social justice-related topics in open, online spaces? I hoped that by answering this question, I would be better equipped to address these discourses and to utilize them in productive, rather than restrictive, ways. Given the focus on discourse in this question, it seemed appropriate to undertake a critical discourse analysis (hereafter CDA) of the data.
As I cited above in Chapter 2, CDA “explores the connections between the use of language and the social, historical and political contexts in which it occurs, how language is used in social interactions and how language influences social relations and practices” (Waller, 2006, p. 10). Thus, while the aforementioned ethnographic lens helped me to better understand participants’ online engagement and perceptions of online spaces, the use of discourse analysis (Lee & Petersen, 2011) was particularly useful in allowing me to both identify and work to unpack the discourses related to teachers and teaching that shaped the ways in which participants were able to understand themselves as future educators, particularly when it came to anti-oppressive education.

The process of carrying out this analysis was two-fold. The first round of analysis happened throughout the interviews themselves, in collaboration with participants, using the iterative process described above. Here, I (and the students) took note of patterns and themes in the language (or discourse) that were used by the participants so that we could then come back to these patterns for further discussion. After the interviews were complete, I listened to the interviews and also re-read the transcribed conversations to further track these discursive themes. Specifically, I went through the interviews and noted references to various themes that I had begun to watch for during the interviews themselves, as well as other themes that I noticed as I reread the transcripts. The major themes and patterns that I took note of included the following:

- The story of the “good” teacher (specifically, the characteristics that the “good” teacher is perceived to have)

- Narratives surrounding online identity and identity in general (in particular, modernist narratives around identity)
I then worked through the themes and discursive patterns that I had found in relation to my chosen theoretical framework and the literature that I reviewed above in Chapter 3. I describe the results of these endeavours in Chapter 6 below.

4.4.3 Addressing Question 3: Putting the Pieces Together

Answering my third research question meant, in part, bringing together the results of the first two questions. That is, in order to answer the question, *How might we better support students in becoming active anti-oppressive educators online?* I needed to first understand the perceived barriers, both discourse-related and otherwise, to engaging with social justice issues online. I also came back to the data. First, I noted the techniques and strategies that the participants identified as helping them to engage online. Second, I noted the ways in which the interviews themselves helped in addressing, in particular, the discourse-related barriers, through the very process of identifying and discussing these normative narratives. In my analysis, I tracked the following themes:

a. Ways of structuring course environments to support students

b. The benefits of unpacking and disrupting normative narratives alongside students

c. The importance of performing particular identities in online spaces, and concomitant possibilities offered by post-structural understandings of agency

I describe the results of this analysis in Chapter 7 below.
4.4.4 Member Checking

In much of qualitative research, a final piece of the analysis involves “member checking,” that is, allowing participants to provide additional input into the outcome of the research in order to improve the quality and accuracy of the data (Creswell, 2014); note that accuracy here does not imply “truth” but instead refers to “information that comes as close as possible to what the research participant is thinking or experiencing at any moment in time” (Roller, 2016, para. 2). Galvin (2017) notes, “While member checking is not essential for qualitative research to be judged adequate, it is especially helpful to an individual who is conducting research alone” (p. 57). Because I was originally planning to do a more ethnographic analysis of the interview data, I planned to use member checking in my research. However, given that my eventual analysis was in large part a critical discourse analysis, the typical method of member checking felt somewhat mismatched with the study, as I explain below.

Madill and Sullivan (2017) describe the ways in which “sore spots” can arise when conducting member checking in various research situations, particularly in studies where there is an acknowledgement that reality is constructed or subjective; they note that participants may express ambivalence regarding the way they are portrayed, or they may actually challenge the portrayal. For example, when engaging in critically-oriented research (as is the case in this study), participants may be embarrassed about things that they said early on in the research or feel that these things are not an accurate representation of their present worldviews; Madill and Sullivan (2017) point out that “participants sometimes note during member checks how much they have changed from
when the data was collected” (p. 25), and indeed, this is the very aim of critical research projects.

Additionally, when a post-structural ontological orientation is taken up in the research, as in this case, the goal of the research is in part to illuminate those things that participants do not recognize (and, indeed, have been conditioned through discourse not to recognize). Thus, coming to understand the ways in which the participants have unknowingly taken up particular discourses can be difficult and uncomfortable, despite being part of the intended outcome. Madill and Sullivan (2017) note that in this type of research, member checking can thus be helpful for both the researcher and the participants and can be useful when done both with the participants (as I did during the interview process) and on one’s own:

[M]ember checks provide the opportunity for researchers to reflect on the interaction and, potentially, to transform their understanding of what is important to [participants] and/or to gain insight into their own blind spots. If this reflective process occurs with [participants], it provides an additional opportunity for them, too, to be similarly transformed. . . . It is important to emphasise that this reflective process may occur both in the interaction and in post hoc analysis. Sore spots can be revealed through in situ hesitations, laughter, ellipses, half-hearted agreement, and direct challenges as well as in features of the researcher’s own questions and response. (p. 25-26)

Ultimately, I took up both of the forms of member checking described above. The first round, as described above, involved discussing the discursive patterns and other interesting trends with participants during the interviews; then, I provided participants
with the rough draft of my analysis and solicited their feedback. In order to mitigate the potential “sore spots” on the part of participants, I made sure to explain the specific challenges described above when I provided participants with the draft of my dissertation, and I also made it clear that I was happy to discuss any concerns that they had.

No major issues emerged in the process of member checking. However, upon reading the draft of my analysis, Samantha (who had originally asked to be referred to by a pseudonym) elected to go by her own name in the research.

4.4.5 Other Considerations: Keeping My Social Positioning in Mind

Of course, the analysis that I carried out was necessarily shaped and influenced by my own social positioning, which I examined in Chapter 1 above. Thus, while the primary focus of my research was to understand and deconstruct participants’ engagement with troubling knowledge and the ways in which such knowledge intersected with and challenged their existing positioning as subjects, it was also important throughout the process to acknowledge and deconstruct my own identity and the ways in which discursive practices shaped the questions that I asked or the data that I collected. Consequently, I made sure to keep this positioning in mind as I carried out my research. In particular, I was sure to consider facets of my social position such as race and gender, as well as the overall degree of privilege that I brought to the research.
Chapter 5: Participants’ Digital Identities and Perceptions of Online Spaces

In this chapter, I turn to the participants, their digital identities, and their perceptions of online spaces, as well as how these perceptions lead to perceived barriers to engaging in social justice work online. I begin by offering a description of each of the participants to help provide some context to the subsequent analysis. In particular, I found that being aware of the various identity categories (gender, race, sexuality, etc.) taken up by each of the participants allowed for a more nuanced understanding of their comments and responses and helped situate their uses of the various discourses being examined (just as I have endeavoured to consider how my own positioning shapes my engagement with discourse). As well, it helped me to have at least a basic understanding of each participant’s background and schooling experiences as I went through the process of analyzing the data.

5.1 Participants

5.1.1 Brooklyn

Brooklyn, a White, cisgender female (pronouns: she, her, hers), is energetic, outgoing, and involved in everything school-related; at the outset of our interviews, she was 20 years old and in the third year of the education program. Brooklyn volunteered to take part in my research because she had heard that I was “very pro-technology” and thought her own reluctance around having a professional digital identity would make for good conversations. Brooklyn and I had not met prior to beginning the interviews, but from the moment Brooklyn walked into my office, she was eager to chat about anything I

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5 Brooklyn elected to go by her own name in this study.
brought up; she was also brutally honest from the start, even when it meant being intensely critical of her own thoughts and actions.

Brooklyn grew up “in the middle of nowhere” on a farm in rural Saskatchewan, where she lived until she moved to the city to attend university at the age of 18. Her family settled in Canada around the start of the twentieth century. She has one brother, and her parents divorced when she was in grade six; both have since remarried. Her father is a rancher, and her mother is a business owner and artist. She described herself as coming from a lower socio-economic status, “not ‘poor-poor’, but not well off.” As we discussed in one interview, her hometown is less than 50 km from the George Gordon Reserve, where the last residential school to close in Canada (in 1996) was located.

In terms of her schooling, Brooklyn described herself as a straight A student and noted that she has always been very involved in school, particularly in leadership activities. She attended a pre-K to 12 school of about 200 students, most of whom were White, and the majority of whom were bussed in from rural areas. Despite the proximity to the reserve, Brooklyn noted that there were very few Indigenous children at her school; most attended Band schools from K-9 and then attended other (presumably less White) high schools. She also noted that from the time that she was in grade four until graduation, there was not a single student of colour attending the school; indeed, she seemed to be able to list every non-White student who passed through the town or the school, as well as how quickly they were “driven away.” Brooklyn graduated from high school in a class of twelve, of which only she and one other student went directly to university.
After her high school graduation, Brooklyn enrolled directly into the secondary education program, majoring in social studies education. She told me that she had always wanted to be a teacher and that she had long enjoyed helping her classmates in school. Brooklyn is the first in her family to attend university and noted that her dad looked down on university degrees, telling her to study something that would get her a job afterwards. Throughout her time in university, Brooklyn continued to be involved in school activities, volunteering for various student organizations and running for student government.

5.1.2 Stephen

Stephen, a White, cisgender male (pronouns: he, him, his), is quiet and thoughtful, and he describes himself as a cynic; at the beginning of the interview process, he was 21 years old and in the third year of the education program. When he emailed me to volunteer for my research, he informed me that he did not have a “defined” digital identity but wondered if this lack of identity might prove useful in my study. I had taught Stephen in a previous semester and had found him to be thoughtful and introspective, and I immediately felt that he would be a good candidate for my dissertation research.

Stephen grew up in a mid-sized city on the prairies; his parents are both of European heritage and his family immigrated to Canada several generations ago as early settlers. An only child, his father is a lawyer and his mother a professor, and he described his family as “well off.” In describing his childhood, Stephen told me that he was “lucky enough to travel a lot” and that he had taken vacations to various locations in North America and Europe.

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6 This participant elected to be referred to by a pseudonym.
As for his education, Stephen described himself as a “pretty good student,” someone who did well in school and “didn’t make the teacher’s life miserable at all.” He attended both elementary and high school in an affluent area of the city. He could recall only two students of colour in his elementary school, and like Brooklyn, he had no trouble pinpointing them: “one Chinese and one African Canadian boy.” Stephen attended a large high school of about 1500 students; while his high school was somewhat more diverse (likely because it hosted the International Baccalaureate program), the socioeconomic status of the student body was still uniformly high.

Stephen told me that he had always been interested in being a teacher, but this choice was solidified when he entered high school and “started realizing that the teachers there were pretty cool. His parents encouraged him to pursue higher education; after graduation, he enrolled in a direct entry Bachelor of Education at a university in a different prairie city, but he transferred back to his hometown’s university after one year (“for family, friends, and girlfriend”), where he is in the secondary program majoring in social studies.

5.1.3 J

J7 is White, gender queer, and pan-sexual (pronouns: they, them, their); they are thoughtful and open, quick-witted and humourous (when I asked about their pronouns, they responded, “I use they, them, their - which some people would say is not grammatically correct, but people have been using [they as a singular pronoun] since Chaucer, so I think it is”). At the outset of our interviews, J was 22 years old and in their final year of the secondary education program. I had taught J in a previous semester, and

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7 This participant elected to be referred to by a pseudonym.
when they emailed to volunteer for my research, they gave what was definitely the most thorough reasoning for their interest:

As a Millennial, I had a digital identity almost from the time I could write. As I became a teacher, parts of the digital identity I had established became problematic, forcing me to negotiate between a completely honest digital identity and a "school appropriate" digital identity. As a queer [individual], anti-oppressive practices are essential in improving multiple areas of my life (cf. sexism, homophobia/biphobia), so I value all aspects of anti-oppressive education very highly. And given that I received almost all of my anti-oppressive/social justice education (in feminism, anti-racism, anti-classism, anti-ableism, etc.) online rather than in any formal school, I know how important the intersection is between the "digital" world and the "real" world, the "digital" identity and the "real" identity. (Personal correspondence, November 2014)

J grew up in a mid-sized prairie city where they now attend university. The eldest of three children, J’s parents are both of European descent; their mother’s family has been in North America for many generations, while their father is a second generation Canadian. J described their upbringing as “upper middle class;” their parents both work for the government and have university degrees.

J attended what they described as a large elementary school and a small high school, both in a middle class, mostly White neighbourhood. They recalled “maybe five” students of colour in elementary and high school, including one Black student in high school. J characterized themself as a straight A student, involved in multiple clubs and activities; they recounted the time that they decided, in senior year, to skip school just
one time, and recalled how they’d done all of the homework in advance and sent it with a friend to be handed in. Despite this outward success, however, J struggled with discomfort throughout high school with their assigned gender identity (which they now recognize as gender dysphoria). As well, they recalled a lot of homophobia in both elementary and high school, and they told me how they had come out as queer in grade eight and were met with bullying, and thus went “back in the closet” until grade twelve, when they came out to only their close friends. At the time of our interviews, J noted that they had only come out as gender queer or non-binary to me and one other professor, some friends, and their mom (but not their dad).

Unlike Brooklyn and Stephen, J did not enroll immediately in university after graduation. Instead, after high school, J says, “I shaved all my hair off. I went to Quebec on a five week . . . French Immersion program. But mostly what I wanted was to get away from everyone who knew me.” After spending some time in the fall semester trying to better understand their gender identity, they ultimately enrolled in a different faculty for one semester and then enrolled in the secondary education program (majoring in English) the following fall, but “the plan was always to be in education.” When I asked why J had chosen to pursue teaching, they recalled that it was initially their mother’s encouragement to enroll in education, but that as time went on, “I was really lucky. . . to discover that this is the thing for me.” They also noted that a big part of their desire to teach at the secondary level was so that they could play a positive role in the lives of future students: “I want to be in the school to make sure the students who are there in the future and today don’t have the same kind of experience that I had when I was in high school.”
5.1.4 Raquel

Raquel, a White cisgender female (pronouns: she, her, hers), is quick, eager, and full of positivity. At only 19 years of age when our interviews began, she was the youngest of the participants; because she had started school early, she was already in the third year of the elementary education program. I had taught Raquel in a previous semester, and she stood out as a truly exceptional student at that time, so I was excited, but not altogether surprised, when she volunteered to take part in my research, as I knew that she had a deep interest in anti-oppressive education.

Raquel had spent most of her childhood living in two different small prairie cities, with the exception of a year and a half that she and her family spent in the Turks and Caicos, where Raquel attended Kindergarten. Both sides of her family are of European heritage; her mother’s family came to Canada in the late 1920s, while her father’s side immigrated to New York in the late 1800s and then later moved to Montreal. Her parents divorced when she was in grade five, after which she lived most of the time with her mother, along with her twin sister and younger brother. Raquel described herself as middle class; her father is in the restaurant business and her mother is a hairdresser. She recalled that her family travelled frequently when she was younger, including the time spent in the Caribbean and three months living in Mexico in the family’s RV.

As a student, Raquel described herself as being a teacher-pleaser and a “try-hard perfectionist,” though she also noted that she was a frequent procrastinator; she told me that she had earned the highest high school average of all of the girls in her school.

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8 Raquel elected to go by her own name in this study.
district. Like my other participants, Raquel recalled attending elementary and high schools with primarily White, middle class student bodies; in one of the cities where she attended school, she could recall only “one or two Black students in high school,” though in the other city, there was a relatively small Indigenous population at the school. She recalled being one of only three White students in her class in the Turks and Caicos but noted that she was never made to feel different there, musing that “maybe because even over there, Whiteness is so dominant in everything, that they were accepting of us because of that.”

Unlike many of my other participants, Raquel didn’t know she wanted to be a teacher from a young age; she recalled still being uncertain about her post-secondary path in the final years of high school. Ultimately, she said, she realized that she loved the jobs and experiences that she had had working with children, and she decided to apply to the education program; she enrolled in the elementary education program immediately following her high school graduation.

5.1.5 Josh

Josh, a White cisgender male (pronouns: he, him, his), was one of the two mature students who took part in my research. As in Brooklyn’s case, Josh and I had not met prior to beginning our interviews, but Josh immediately struck me as open and laid-back, and the conversation flowed easily. At the time that our interviews began, Josh was 32 years old and was in the fourth year of a five-year joint program in kinesiology and secondary education. Unlike many of the other participants, Josh volunteered because he

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9 This participant elected to be referred to by a pseudonym.
was interested in the technological piece of the research; he noted that he was interested in learning more about online interactions given that he was using a blog and Twitter for his ECS210 class that semester.

Josh grew up on the west coast of Canada, in a city of about 70,000 people. He described his father as a “jack of all trades” who held numerous different jobs in the course of his life, while his mother worked as an educational assistant; Josh is the oldest of three brothers. His family is of European descent, and he told me that his mother’s side of the family had been in Canada since around the turn of the twentieth century, with his father’s family immigrating to Canada after World War II.

As a student, Josh described himself as “the unmotivated but gifted type” who tended not to “make waves” in the classroom. He attended an elementary school that he described as being “relatively diverse,” noting that there were many southeast Asian and East Indian families in the area. He recalled there being kids from different socio-economic backgrounds at the school. He completed his high school at a “self-directed learning” school with a population of about a thousand, where students were able to work through the materials in some classes (such as math or English) at their own pace; he noted that this school had a similarly diverse student body.

After high school, Josh applied to and was accepted at two different universities but ultimately didn’t attend either, a choice that he attributed to his own fear of failing at higher education. Instead, he worked various jobs in the service and lumber industries as well as travelling to/living in several locations in the United States and Canada, eventually ending up in the prairies. About ten years after his high school graduation, Josh decided to enroll in the direct entry joint degree program, majoring in physical
education. He recalled originally choosing education because he enjoyed helping others but had also begun to realize that, as someone not born on the prairies, he might be able to bring very different perspectives and understandings to his classroom here.

5.1.6 Samantha

Samantha is a White, cisgender female (pronouns: she, her, hers); she is thoughtful and friendly, and she described herself as a “people pleaser.” At the beginning of our interviews, Samantha was 20 years old and in the third year of the secondary education program. I had taught her in a previous semester and had also worked with her at two digital citizenship events, so our conversations were very comfortable from the very beginning; at our last meeting, Samantha lamented the end of her “weekly therapy” sessions. Perhaps more than any of the other participants, Samantha often felt the need to give the “right answer” to my questions, a habit that we talked about several times in relation to her understanding of the production of the good student (which I discuss more below).

Samantha grew up in a small, 2000-person community about twenty minutes outside of the prairie city where she now attends university; she lived with her parents during university and commuted to the city for classes. On her father’s side, her ancestors immigrated from Europe many generations ago, likely as early settlers (her mother is adopted, so she was unaware of the history of that side of her family). Samantha’s father is a security guard, and her mother is a nurse; she has one younger brother. She

10 Samantha elected to go by her own name in this study.
characterized her family as “middle class and very average” and noted that they travelled around Canada fairly frequently as a child.

Describing her educational experience, Samantha characterized herself as a “pretty typical” student, one who loved school and was scared to break the rules. She told me that she attended an elementary school of about 400 people and noted that it was largely “White and middle class.” She could recall one Filipino family at the school but noted that they were not recent immigrants (she described them as culturally Canadian). After grade eight, Samantha attended a mid-sized high school in her community, where students were bussed in from both the surrounding farms and reserves in the area. Here, she recalled that there was a bit more diversity, with a small group of Indigenous students attending the school, though she noted that the student population was still largely White and middle class.

Samantha recalled that she had wanted to be a teacher since elementary school, and so, after graduation, she enrolled directly into the Bachelor of Education program, where she is in the secondary program with a major in English. When I asked why she’d chosen education, she replied, “I can’t see me being anywhere else. I don’t have another option. This is the only thing that made sense for me. I just loved school and couldn’t imagine leaving.”

5.1.7 Kaylene

Kaylene, a White, cisgender female (pronouns: she, her, hers), is engaged, confident, and quick-witted. At 35 years of age when we started the interviews, she was 11 Kaylene elected to go by her own name in this study.
the oldest of the participants; like Josh, she was a mature student, and she was in her third year of the elementary education program. I had taught Kaylene in a previous semester and knew that she had a passion for anti-oppressive education; she had also taken part in a pilot interview project that I had completed in the spring of 2014. Thus, I was not surprised that she also volunteered to take part in my doctoral research.

Kaylene was born and raised in the mid-sized prairie city where she went on to attend university (with the exception of two years during her childhood spent living in another nearby prairie city). Her ancestors on both sides were of European descent, and her grandparents were first generation Canadians and Americans. Her parents, now semi-retired, were formerly business owners, and she has one older brother; Kaylene also recalled that her parents acted as foster parents during her childhood and temporarily cared for a number of First Nations foster children over the years. Describing her family’s socio-economic status, Kaylene said, “We never wanted for anything, but . . . we definitely weren’t loaded.”

Kaylene’s family moved around several times during her childhood, so she attended a number of different elementary schools. In contrast to the experiences of my other participants, Kaylene’s first elementary school was a “community school” (a designation by the Ministry of Education that is applied to schools located in higher-needs communities) and had a primarily Indigenous student body with a generally low socio-economic status. After this, however, Kaylene went on to attend four other elementary schools that were all predominantly White, with varying degrees of diversity; at the final elementary school, for instance, she recalled seeing “maybe two First Nations kids at the school at that time.” Kaylene went on to attend what she termed a somewhat
“rough” high school, still predominantly White but with some students of colour. She recalled her high school years as a time of rebellion; she began doing drugs and ultimately dropped out of school for a year, but she later re-enrolled, pulled her grades up, and graduated. She described herself as a bit of a rule-breaker and someone who needed to understand why she was being asked to do certain things: “I have no problem respecting my elders, respecting my teachers, but . . . if they tell me to do something I need to hear a reason for it. It needs to make sense, and it needs to not be oppressing anyone.”

After high school, Kaylene first completed a year of massage therapy training, then spent some time travelling around Canada and worked in the service industry. She then completed her TESOL (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages) certification and moved to China to teach. She met her husband online when she was in her mid-twenties, and they taught together in Asia until she became pregnant with her first child, at which point they moved to England (where her husband is originally from). Eventually, the family moved back to the prairies to be closer to Kaylene’s parents, and both Kaylene and her husband ultimately enrolled in the education program, with the future goal of someday returning to Asia to teach at an international school. When I asked Kaylene what had drawn her to teaching, she told me that it felt like a way to make an impact and to help those who are “underprivileged or oppressed in some way.”
5.1.8 Early Observations

Several things became clear in the first few rounds of interviews, which focused on participants’ backgrounds, experiences in the education program, and understandings and experiences of racism. First, I was struck by the degree to which these students have embraced and are committed to the idea of anti-oppressive education. Samantha noted that she had learned, in the past two years, that to be a good teacher, “being nice doesn’t cut it anymore.” Raquel, meanwhile, described feeling a “whole disconnect between last year and this year” leading to a sense of loss, because her third-year education courses did not continue with the same focus on anti-oppressive education that was present in her second year. As well, I noted even when students’ initial reactions to a question were clearly influenced by dominant narratives of race, the students were able to identify these patterns in their own thinking when I pressed for clarification. For instance, Brooklyn, when asked whether she still saw racism in the faculty’s education program, immediately drew on the discourse of reverse-racism/sexism and noted that Aboriginal students and men were more likely to be accepted into the faculty; however, when I asked her a follow-up question on this, she began to unpack her motivations for saying this. Samantha, when attempting to describe what she felt she needed to be a successful teacher, went through a series of answers, each time unpacking and revising her responses as she questioned how her thinking might be oppressive or problematic, and finally settling on the idea that there was no perfect answer and that searching for one was a product of her own conditioning.

12 The first paragraph of section 5.1.8 is adapted from a blog post that I wrote in March of 2015, shortly after completing my interviews.
Clearly, we had been doing something right in this education program. Of course, I was sure to keep in mind the type of student who was actually willing to volunteer for research about anti-oppressive education, and I needed to consider the degree to which the participants (many of whom are self-described teacher-pleasers) were taking up the role of the “good” student and giving the “correct” answer.

It is also worth noting that all but one of my prairie-raised participants were able to pinpoint the non-White students they had gone to school with. For these five participants, memories of racism were prevalent and obvious. For instance, Brooklyn was able to pinpoint multiple examples of blatant racism that occurred during her childhood. She described both her family and the town she grew up in as being “very racist” (although she also noted, “I’m not saying that people were bad - that was just what we grew up on”). She characterized the racism as generally overt: exclusion, derogatory language, racist jokes, and she admitted that she herself had a “native accent” that she had perfected and said that she felt embarrassed recalling this. One of her earliest memories was of her mother telling her to go into the bedroom at the back of the house and saying, “Lock the door, because there’s a native coming to the house,” and she remarked that this was almost a weekly experience. She also recalled being at her grandparents’ house, which was closer to the reserve, and hearing the sounds of the powwow a few miles away: “My brother was scared that they were going to come down the road and get us because he could hear the drums.”

These early observations were helpful in that they led me to identify some of the themes that I then pulled out as I revisited the transcripts. For instance, the degree to
which students were able, with guidance, to unpack their unconscious biases led me to pay close attention to this process of unpacking as I completed my analysis.

5.2 Question 1: Results

_How do pre-service teachers understand the process of engaging with discomforting knowledge and “controversial” social justice-related topics in open, online spaces, and what are the perceived barriers to engaging with these issues via digital media?_

As I mentioned above in Chapter 4, in order to answer my first research question, I used an ethnographic, interpretivist lens to make sense of my interviews with participants. In particular, I looked for participant data related to the following three themes:

- Participants’ digital identities and present use of social media
- Participants’ perceptions of online spaces and online identity
- Participants’ current and past experiences of engaging with social justice issues in online spaces

The results of my analysis follow.

5.2.1 Participants’ Digital Identities and Social Media Use

All seven of the participants used social media both personally and professionally to some degree, but their activities online ranged from heavy to minimal. Almost all of them (with the exception of J and Kaylene) named Facebook as their primary personal platform; for professional use, they each had a blog (a requirement of the ECS210 class as well as other courses in the faculty) and a Twitter account (highly encouraged in many of the education classes), though not all of the Twitter accounts were currently in active
use. For the most part, the participants had certain platforms (usually Facebook and Instagram) that they used for more personal interactions with friends and family, while other platforms (primarily blogs and Twitter) that were used for professional purposes.

5.2.2 Participants’ Personal Use of Social Media

As I noted above, all but two of the participants used Facebook as their primary personal-use platform, but their activities on Facebook varied considerably. Stephen, for instance, told me that he had been on the platform since 2008 and had gotten an account because “everyone else had one.” He also had accounts on Instagram and Snapchat. Stephen described his use of these sites like Facebook and Instagram as passive, mostly scrolling through posts to pass time while he was waiting for something or otherwise unoccupied; he noted that he almost never posted pictures of himself and indeed rarely posted on social media in general, with the exception of sometimes sharing photos of his dog.

Samantha, similarly, told me that she rarely posted pictures or statuses on Facebook anymore; she noted that her Facebook account was used mostly for personal communication via direct messages. She noted that she also used YouTube quite frequently to watch videos.

Raquel told me that she got her Facebook account in grade 8 and described her use of the platform as mostly passive; she noted that while she did sometimes post pictures, she posted infrequently in general and didn’t usually post news articles because she felt that her Facebook friends were unlikely to want to discuss things like political issues.
Josh also told me that he used Facebook as his primary personal social network and noted that he had been on the platform since 2006. He noted that he used Facebook mainly to stay in touch and keep family and friends updated on his life, saying that it helped him to feel connected despite being in a different province. He told me that he used Facebook every day and posted “a status or two” per day, as well as commented on other peoples’ posts, talking to friends via direct message, and playing games. He noted that he posted primarily about his daily activities but occasionally would post about political issues.

Brooklyn told me that she used both Facebook and Pinterest as her personal social networks. Compared to some of my other participants, Brooklyn described herself as a much more active Facebook user. She first got her account when she was 12, “because that was the cool thing to do back then.” She was one of the first among her classmates to get onto Facebook and has many friends, ranging from university friends to family to people from her hometown. She told me that she went on Facebook about “once an hour,” usually to post a status or a picture as well as to scroll through her news feed.

Compared to some of my other participants, Kaylene used a wider array of social media accounts for personal use, including YouTube, Google+, and Facebook. Her primary platform was YouTube, where she and her partner ran a monetized family account. She told me that she used Facebook daily to communicate with family and friends, to share news articles, and to promote her family’s YouTube account. Kaylene noted that her Facebook account was the most private of all her social accounts, because she uses that platform to share family photos. She describes the account as “a reflection of who I am.”
J’s use of social media for personal purposes was largely different from my other participants. They told me that they used both Tumblr and Facebook, but Tumblr was their primary platform, and they were on it “every day for multiple hours sometimes.” They noted that the account (original through Live Journal) was initially “pure fandom,” but over the years it became more diversified, including topics like feminism, politics, and even early modern English linguistics. The account was set up under a pseudonym, and J told me that it could not be associated with their real name; they noted that they were connected on Tumblr only to people who they had never met face-to-face. J’s Facebook account, by contrast, is under their real name, and they have been on that platform since their early teens. They described Facebook as a “narcissistic” platform but did say that they had used it during internship and pre-internship to connect with other pre-service teachers for support. As well, unlike the other participants, J used Twitter for both professional and personal purposes and had two different accounts. They told me that they had started one account in high school and, when they got to university and decided to use Twitter for school-related activities, decided that it would be easier to simply set up a second account, not because it was “offensive or anything, but just too personal or irrelevant to my professional life to revamp it.” J noted that their personal Twitter account was locked and under a pseudonym; when I asked what they used the account for, J told me:

I tweeted back and forth with several people who were also transgender. That was one way I communicated with other transgendered people. I tweeted about feminism. I tweeted about activism events, marches and things like that going on in various parts of the world, or that I kept up on. Hashtags like – one of them was
Black Lives Matter that I've been looking at recently. Things like that. And for fan content, most or the major archive of our own has a tweeting system that when an author that I follow publishes a new work, I'll get a tweet alert. Things like that.

5.2.3 Participants’ Professional Use of Social Media

Of all of the participants, Stephen was definitely the most reticent user of social media when it came to professional use. He had a number of different WordPress-based blogs that he started for various classes, and he also had multiple Twitter accounts. He noted that he simply forgot the passwords to the old accounts and so he started new ones. Both his various blog sites and his Twitter accounts were used only for course-related activities.

Brooklyn told me that she used both a blog (which she, like Stephen, was required to get for a class) and a Twitter account professionally. Her Twitter account was previously a personal account during high school, but she had “cleaned it up a lot” recently and now used it strictly for educational purposes; she described her current account as “sterile.” While Brooklyn did use her Twitter account by choice, her blog, like Stephen’s, was used for course activities.

Samantha’s perception of professional social media use was generally positive. She told me that she first got a Twitter account when she worked with me as part of a provincial youth forum on digital citizenship, and that she used the platform mainly to post about education-related topics, often as part of her courses. She noted that she enjoyed using Twitter as part of class discussions because of the immediate feedback: “I
get responses immediately, and it's good to see what other people are thinking at the
exact same time of the lecture as I am . . . [S]ometimes we'll talk about the tweets that
have happened during the seminar [later that week] even, so it's kind of like this happens
and we discuss it later [so it’s] a balanced thing going on.” She noted that using Twitter
in this way was helpful for her learning: “I've referenced people's comments in my blog
posts, and so it's helped expand my horizons . . . . [I]t's just another thing that I can talk
about and be like, ‘Oh, this person said this, which is totally different than what I'm
thinking.’” Samantha’s blog was also started due to course requirements, and she
admitted that using it was initially a struggle because she found the technology
frustrating. However, she noted that while she did not use her blog outside of her courses,
she now enjoyed the blogging process and would opt to do class-related reflections on her
blog rather than on paper if given the option. She noted that her site now felt like “my
own little space. . . a nice little scrapbook of my progression” and told me that she could
see using it in the future as a communication tool in the classroom.

For Josh, Twitter was used primarily as part of his classes, including tweeting
during lectures, posting the occasional education-related meme or article, and favoring or
retweeting his classmates’ content. His blog, which he started using actively as part of his
ECS210 class, was mostly used for posts related to class. However, he told me that he
occasionally posted independently, saying that in one case, for example, after attending
an education-related event, he wrote a post to “‘get [his thoughts] out there and talk about
this,’ because I tend to bottle things up and if I don't get them out there, I start thinking
too much and I don't sleep enough.” Like Samantha, he could see the benefits of social
media for his learning; of blogging, he told me:
From a professional standpoint I'd love it if other teachers were on there, reading and listening to my thoughts and thinking about things, even if I don't change minds. It's nice to put that bug in people's ear. Preferably at this point my peers, my classmates at university who are going to become teachers because we're all still sort of forming that identity.

Kaylene first got her Twitter account for her ECS210 class and had become a frequent user since that time - she noted that she had turned into “a bit of a Twitter addict.” She told me that she often posted once a day, and she used the platform to connect to others “on an educational basis,” including with those outside of her program (practising teachers, for examples). She got her blog for one of her classes and had purchased her own domain name, and she told me that she used it to post professional content, both for course requirements and on her own.

Raquel, meanwhile, told me that she first got a Twitter account for a first-year education class, but she didn’t enjoy the platform because she didn’t yet know who to follow. She then got an account for ECS210 and this time followed only education-related accounts; she found that the platform became much more relevant. She noted:

I started using it for ECS 210, so I would just kind of tweet during lectures interesting things people said or my own thoughts about lectures. Then I started tweeting my blog posts, so I guess [in] that space I’m a little more comfortable with people seeing my views on particular education topics, because that’s what the network is built of.

Like my other participants, Raquel also had a blog that she had gotten for one of her classes, but she had also been using the site to blog independently on education-related
topics. She identified her blog as a place where she could work through things that she had been learning and gave the example of writing a post after she was asked (at a student event) to define what anti-oppression meant to her and was struggling to put her response into words.

Finally, as I noted above, J told me that they had both a professional and a personal Twitter account. Like my other participants, they noted that their professional account was education-related; they used it to tweet teacher resources and had shared class materials with their students during their internship experience. J’s rationale here was somewhat different, however:

When I started a professional account, I wanted most of that to be directly related to teaching. Not just for anyone who's following, but also for me to be able to go back through that archive and find materials and things like that more easily. So that was the only time I used that Twitter account for something other than things that were directly related to teaching.

In addition to their Twitter account, J had a Live Journal [blog] account that they created for a class. They told me that they used this platform only for required class-related posts.

5.2.4 Perceptions of Digital Identity and Online Spaces

As I interviewed the participants, I began to see that their beliefs about digital identity and online spaces varied widely and that these beliefs affected the way in which they participated in the digital sphere.

Stephen, definitely the most reticent social media user, admitted to doing very little to intentionally build a digital identity, though he said that he was not concerned
about anything that was online. He noted the following when I asked whether he felt that
his digital identity was important: “Not yet. Just ’cause I don’t really know what it can
accomplish. Like I don’t know the benefit that that would have. And I’m not adverse to
trying it, it's just I don’t know what it would get me.” His main hesitation around
developing a professional digital identity appeared to be that it would require a great deal
of effort (both to build and maintain), and he wasn’t sure if the return on investment
would be worthwhile. He stated: “If I could be sure it would be worthwhile, I think I
would be more drawn to do that. . . . I think that if I had an understanding about what I
was doing was going to be heard, I might be more open to doing it.”

Stephen’s limited online participation also stemmed from his view of social media
as a somewhat frivolous space where meaningful conversations were not necessarily
welcome. He noted, “I think people come to twitter and other social media websites not
looking for that hard-hitting critical stuff and looking for an escape of sorts. Or just like
shut down the brain for a bit.” For Stephen, the online world was disconnected from the
offline one, and he perceived the former as far less important. Consequently, he didn’t
see the need to engage with social justice issues online.

Josh, on the other hand, saw the online world not as a separate entity but as a key
component of contemporary reality. He noted:

Everything is run off of computers, social media – there's connections to
everything, everywhere. And if you're abstaining from those connections, you're
1) not giving yourself the best opportunity for success in this particular world that
we're in, and 2) you're not understanding where your students are coming from.
You're not understanding where your peers are coming from, your bosses, everybody else who's using those spaces.

Because of this perception, Josh saw his participation in online spaces as an educator as an important facet of his overall teacher identity.

Essentially, then, participants’ views on engaging with social justice issues online related to the extent to which they subscribed to the idea of digital dualism. That is, those who saw the online world as an extension of face-to-face interactions were more likely to see a need to extend their anti-oppressive practices to the digital sphere.

Another element that shaped participants’ online behaviours related to their perceptions of personal vs. professional social media. As I noted above, participants tended to differentiate between their professional, education-related social media accounts (usually Twitter and blogs, such as WordPress) and their personal account (usually Facebook). When discussing the construction of their digital identities, many participants distinguished between the two types of social media, essentially separating their online personas into two unique parts. Brooklyn, for instance, noted that she was less cautious on Facebook because she felt that it was a more private space: “I think I'm a little bit more cautious on Twitter just because it's easier [for others to see what you post] on Twitter than on Facebook.” She added, “With the blog, especially in class, I'm a lot more cautious because I feel that's a lot more open than my little Facebook world.”

Brooklyn described her time on Facebook as “me time,” while characterizing her time on her time on Twitter and her blog as “school time or professional time;” the latter were “sterile” spaces where she had to be much more “strict” about what she shared.
Josh, similarly, noted that Facebook was a more personal space for him, contrasting it with the more serious nature of Twitter: “I look at Twitter as a little bit more about connecting with things. . . . I try to use it a little bit more professionally than I do Facebook. . . . Twitter, to me, is still a professional space, compared to Facebook. Facebook is social.” He told me that on Twitter, he was conscious of needing to use particular language in order to present the appropriate kind of teacher identity:

I try to present myself as professionally as possible. Part of it being just the way that the tweets are structured, making sure that the language that I use is professional, it's not childish, it's not vulgar, it's all that kind of stuff. Part of it is just trying to actually think a little bit more deeply about whatever question is being asked, or if I actually do ask a question is it going to be an A or B answer or is it going to be an open-ended answer.

Unsurprisingly, Josh told me that his blog identity was similar to the one that he projected on Twitter, but more fleshed out.

As noted above, for all but J, Facebook was generally perceived as a private platform, and thus there was less of a need to curate a professional teacher identity on Facebook, although none of the participants described themselves as the sort of person who would post potentially problematic content (photos of themselves drinking or acting inappropriately) on the platform. Kaylene noted, “I honestly am not the type of person that would be like, "Oh I'm going to go out and get hammered and then everybody can see pictures of me all over Facebook." That's not me.” Samantha, similarly, said that she was “not a partier” and had even unfriended people who posted gossip or other things that she felt were inappropriate.
The shared notion that Facebook was less public was compounded by the fact that while the participants’ blogs and Twitter accounts were all open to the public, their Facebook profiles were generally more restricted, with maximum privacy settings enabled. Many of the participants told me that they had been encouraged to lock down their accounts by professors in the education program. J, however, took a different approach to ensuring privacy; as I noted above, they had gone as far as to use entirely different names on some of their personal accounts, including their Tumblr account. This was interesting because J described that account (rather than Facebook) as “the most authentic of my online identities,” and thus keeping it disconnected from their real name afforded it the maximum level of privacy. All of this suggests that the participants felt that they needed to protect the parts of their identities that were most “real” or closest to their true natures, while simultaneously curating a more public-facing professional teacher identity.

5.2.5 Participants’ Current and Past Experiences of Engaging with Social Justice Issues in Online Spaces

A final theme that I followed in order to answer my first research question was that of participants’ experiences of engaging with social justice issues online. In particular, I was interested in how comfortable participants were with posting potentially “controversial” articles or statements as well as how they felt about confronting statements that they felt were racist/sexist/homophobic in online spaces. The participants had a wide range of past experiences in engaging in these ways online, and they also had different thoughts about where this type of engagement should take place.
Kaylene, for instance, was unique in that she told me that she enjoyed sharing articles or videos that were related to social justice issues on her Facebook page (on which she connected to mostly family and close friends), saying, “Yeah. I like to create conversation. It's fun when it happens.” She expressed an openness to both sparking and responding to controversial conversations on the platform. She also told me that she felt comfortable commenting on blog posts (including strangers’ posts) that related to these issues because, “I figure that if they are putting themselves out there and have a blog, then they're looking for responses, and they're open to connecting with others. 'Cause you don't put yourself on a blog and hide, right?” Kaylene noted that in the past, she had addressed things that were racist or sexist online by directing the poster to a relevant YouTube video or a TED Talk.

Brooklyn, however, was more hesitant about addressing controversial issues on Facebook. In particular, of issues that related to politics or religion, she noted, “I have certain views about things, and I know people on there who have certain views, and I know they're very opinionated about that. So I'm like, ‘No, you just don't touch that with a stick.’” In the case of a friend posting something inappropriate, Brooklyn told me that she was unlikely to unfriend them or to address it because of the potential for conflict.

Josh, similarly, expressed the desire to avoid conflict in terms of confronting others online on Facebook and said that his preference would be to confront someone via private message, but he noted that he increasingly saw this method as problematic: “If the people who realize these things [posts that are racist, sexist, etc.] are wrong don't stand up and say something about them being wrong people who don't realize that they're wrong will continue to think they're right, will . . . continue the stereotype, continue the joke.”
For Raquel, Facebook was likewise a place where she often avoided confrontations, saying, “I feel like arguments just get out of control and [are] just not really productive conversations on Facebook.” On Twitter, however, she felt more comfortable confronting others over problematic posts because of the way that she had been taught to use Twitter in her education courses:

We are kind of encouraged to, and it feels less like attacking people. I think with the Twitter network that I have . . . it’s a personal learning network so everyone is trying to help each other learn more so that might mean challenging your view or making you think of something differently. So I think it’s more accepted, and I think it’s more well received because it’s not “Oh you are attacking my thoughts,” it’s “Oh, I didn’t think of it that way.”

Thus, for Raquel, her perception of Twitter as a professional network made it easier to disagree with people without it feeling like a personal attack.

J’s experiences online stood out from my other participants, because from a young age they had been engaging frequently in conversations about social justice issues, in this case specifically about gender. Indeed, J credits the Internet with helping them to understand their gender identity, noting:

I couldn’t face people [in offline settings]. I didn’t want to talk. Part of this was my social anxiety, but part of it wasn’t. I couldn’t stand to talk to people because there was something I felt wrong with my voice. There was something wrong with the way people would look at me and see and perceive me. And it wasn’t till I started googling that I started realizing that this is a thing that lots of people go through. This can be normal and there are ways to deal with it. And it was people
on the internet really who taught me how to deal with the dysphoria and that there were other ways to understand my gender than ‘you are just a girl.’

Based on these early experiences, J began to feel comfortable engaging with social justice issues on social media and indeed told me that they felt a need to do so: “When you have knowledge and you have power, if you have the ability, it’s your responsibility to share that with others. And to improve things for the rest of your community. . . . I suppose I do feel responsible a little bit.” They noted that their positioning as both marginalized (with respect to gender identity) and privileged (as White and middle class) gave them both the understandings and the power to take up difficult topics online: “Yeah, being marginalized has made me want to help and being aware of the ways that I’m not marginalized has made me feel equipped to help.”

Despite this, however, J noted that their approach to confronting examples of racism or sexism online differed depending on the platform involved. Similar to several of my other participants, they noted that on Facebook, which they considered to be more of a “personal” social network, if they saw someone posting something racist or otherwise problematic, they would not call the person out directly but would instead post something of their own that addressed it; on Tumblr, meanwhile, they said that they would say something directly to the person. J explained this difference by saying, “[On Facebook], people get very defensive if you bring these things up because they feel like they're being personally attacked. For some reason, that attitude is different on Facebook than it is on Tumblr.”

It became apparent, then, that for the most part, participants found it more difficult to deal with social justice issues or to call out racist/sexist comments on
platforms that they considered to be more personal, and where they were connected to family and friends (namely, Facebook). Participants often saw Facebook as the most private social media platform for them, suggesting that they found it easier to engage with social justice issues online when the interactions were with strangers (or people they were less close to).

Considering the results of the three themes I described above in this chapter, I was able to develop a sense of the way that the participants perceived the online environments (various social media platforms) in which they were engaged. From this, I was able to draw out several features of these environments that contributed to students’ perceived barriers when it came to taking up social justice issues in these online spaces. I turn to this analysis below.

5.3 Perceived Barriers to Engaging with Social Justice-Related Issues Online

As I mentioned, the results of my analysis of the three themes described above (participants’ digital identities and social media use, participants’ perceptions of digital identity and online spaces, and participants’ current and past experiences of engaging with social justice issues in online spaces) led me to identify some of the perceived barriers that resulted from the unique characteristics of digital environments and the ways in which participants interacted in these environments. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these barrier-causing characteristics were related to some of the unique complexities of online environments that I outlined above in Chapter 3, as I discuss below.
5.3.1 Audience and Context Collapse

For the participants, one of the biggest challenges around engaging with social justice issues online arose from the complexities surrounding the idea of audience in digital spaces. As I noted in Chapter 3 above, both Wesch (2009) and boyd (2013) describe the phenomenon of context collapse in online spaces. Wesch (2009) notes that in digital environments, we lose the ability to know our audience, and thus we have no context for which “self” we should present in any given situation. Instead, we must be prepared to be seen by “an infinite number of contexts collapsing upon one another [...] virtually all possible contexts” (including by our future selves) (p. 23). When dealing with social justice issues, which can often be perceived as controversial, this context collapse can present a particularly large challenge.

Samantha, for instance, described how it could be difficult to speak about social justice issues in the context of teaching while in online stages, because she recognized that different educators were at different stages in their journeys to take up anti-oppressive education (and indeed, many educators were also not on this journey at all). She noted, “I think that kind of stuff is hard to write about just because it's an open space. . . . I think it's more appropriate – I think just doing it in class is a better approach because then you get teachers at the same stage as you are.”

For Brooklyn, one of the major concerns about addressing social justice issues online was her family. She noted that coming to university, and particularly going through the anti-oppressive approach used in this faculty, had caused her to begin reflecting on her past; she remarked that it was difficult to go home now that she had developed a more critical lens, saying, “It’s disturbing going home to see all of this - you
just see all this stuff and you want to change it but you can’t because it is so deeply embedded.” She found herself challenging her father about his racist views, which led to many fights, and she was called an “Indian-lover” by immediate family on both sides. She did also note that she was working on finding new ways to challenge the ingrained racist views back home without being confrontational.

Posting online, then, became difficult because of the potential for her family, and particularly her dad, to see anything that she wrote:

Because [my dad and I] have such different world views, because I feel like I don't want to put him down. . . if I brought [these topics] up on Facebook, it's going to open up a big can of worms out there because anybody could see it anywhere that I have it, whereas if I just talk about it here [in classes], my dad's not going to hear.

Brooklyn also felt concern more generally about the potential for anyone to see her posts. When we discussed her blog specifically, I asked Brooklyn, “Who's going to read [your social justice-related post] and care?” and she responded, “Exactly. I don't know.” The context collapse that occurs in online spaces opened up a wide and unknown audience that Brooklyn found difficult to navigate.

Looking at Facebook specifically illustrates the way that context collapse can present difficulties. As I noted above, the participants generally saw Facebook as a private space, shared largely with friends and family rather than strangers or more distant acquaintances. This made it difficult for them to engage with social justice issues because they felt that some in their audience on Facebook would react negatively. Stephen, for instance, noted that he was hesitant to put too much on Facebook because he didn’t feel
that his Facebook friends would care about those topics: he told me that “just assuming
that people on my Facebook want to hear what I have to say is presumptuous.” He
remarked that he also had little patience for people who seemed to be overly “righteous”
or who appeared to be posting in order “to convince you that they think a lot about stuff,”
and so he assumed that his friends would feel the same way. Josh, meanwhile, noted that
the potential audience on Facebook was simply too broad, so it became difficult to know
how to act. He told me, “When I share things face-to-face with people, I’m choosing one
person at a time or two people at a time or three people at a time. It's not the 200 people
I'm Facebook friends with, right?” This led him to avoid posting things that were
potentially controversial.

Raquel also identified audience as a potential concern on Facebook. In this case,
her worry was that posting to Facebook essentially guaranteed that more attention would
be brought to whatever was posted than when posting to a less targeted audience. She
gave the example of writing about social justice issues on her blog and then sharing the
post on Facebook, noting, “I’d be a lot more nervous posting one of my blog posts to my
Facebook. Way more. I’m getting anxiety thinking about it - just kidding, not that bad -
but yeah, because I know people would read it.”

5.3.2 Persistence, Replicability, Scalability, and Searchability

In Chapter 3 above, I noted that one of the complexities of online environments
is, according to boyd (2008a; 2014), that communications in these spaces are subject to
the four characteristics of persistence, replicability, scalability, and searchability. These
four characteristics led, in many cases, to participants’ perceived barriers related to
engaging with social justice issues online. Specifically, the four features of online environments means that things that are posted online are both permanent and easy to find, which can lead to concerns about potential negative impacts on future employment. (Note that this was further compounded by the tendency to see online identity through a modernist, and therefore fixed, lens, which I discuss in Chapter 6 below.)

As young people growing up in the digital age, the participants had been inundated with the message that “Online is forever.” For pre-service teachers, this message then led to another; as J put it, “They say lock up your Facebook account, because that's the sort of thing that can lose you a job.” For most of the participants, moreover, this message then was transferred to other online platforms as well, with the result that many of them expressed a good deal of apprehension about how any of their posts or tweets could be perceived negatively by a future principal or colleague, leading to either job loss or the inability to be hired in the first place.

Raquel, for instance, noted that she had often heard peers discuss their discomfort about posting things that they had written online. In particular, she mentioned that the members of the student group she was leading were reticent to contribute to the website’s blog and noted, “I imagine it’d be a little scary if you weren’t a very confident writer” to put things out there for the public to see. J, similarly, noted that they were very careful to use formal language online: So I don't want my name [or] my Twitter to come up, and for them to take a look and go oh, no, [this job candidate] is out, because this is the kind of person who habitually uses . . . bad English.” Because of this fear, J told me, “I'm sure there's a lot of . . . older teachers who use slang and things like that all the time. But I wrote to [my] audience based on the least accepting possible audience I might have.” In
this case, the fear of being judged by future employers or colleagues was compounded by the issue of context collapse described above, leading J to worry about how anything they posted could forever be judged by the harshest possible audience, which understandably made them cautious about posting.

While Raquel and J expressed concerns around having their writing critiqued by future employers, others were more specific about the potential for posts about social justice issues to derail their future careers. Brooklyn, for instance, noted, “You don't know where you're getting placed [in internship]. You don't know what your future holds. So if you're putting stuff up on the internet that is controversial, that could have repercussions down the road for you.” She gave the example of applying for a job in a Catholic school: “If I said I was in support of abortion, [those doing the hiring] would be like, ‘No.’ Or if I was in support of the LGBTQ community, ‘No.’ If I put it up there and they know this, they're just going to be like, "No, because that doesn't conform with [our beliefs].” She felt it was safer, then, to avoid those types of potentially controversial issues.

When I asked Josh what the risk was of posting social justice related content, he replied:

What's the risk? You get blacklisted. You don't get hired. Not necessarily that that's the way that it should be, and you're going to try to be impartial as an admin or as a teacher who is giving a recommendation. . . but the reality is, we're all people. We all have those biases that can come in. And if you don't like [somebody’s politics] and you have the power to do something about it, maybe
you're going to abuse that power. So yeah, there is that fear that you're going to get blacklisted.

Samantha, similarly, identified the need to be cautious about what she posted due to future repercussions. Of online spaces, she noted: “It's always there, you can't really get rid of it. . . . I don't want to make mistakes. . . my [future] principal, he could read it, or she could read it, or any school board could read it. Anyone would have access to that forever.” She noted this about making a mistake online: “That's forever something that's attached to who I am as a teacher, or that's something if I were ever to change positions or jobs that they'd say, "Oh, well. We saw this. You made this mistake, this subliminal racial message mistake.”” For both Josh and Samantha, then, it made more sense to play it safe until he was hired, both while in his internship and online. Similarly, Kaylene noted that as a pre-service teacher, she felt that being too controversial could lead to being disliked: “It feels like you could be jeopardizing your career, right, because who is going to want to hire the person that's just pissing everybody off?” Interestingly, she also provided the most concrete example of how her online posts could derail a future career. She told me that as part of one of her classes, she had made a video in which she identified herself as bisexual, and she noted that she had made the decision after the class ended to change the video to private:

Because I know that when we're finished our education, we're wanting to go back to Asia, probably to a place where they would judge me based on my sexuality. . . I know that [the video] could jeopardize me getting a job in the future in a country that doesn't support homosexuality or bisexuality.
Kaylene expressed some discomfort around this, noting, “I don't feel like I should have to hide this important part about myself. And hopefully later on it won't be an issue.” She told me, however, that ultimately, “I think I'm willing to slightly cover up part of my identity while we're paying off student loans.”

For several participants, therefore, the fact that online posts were generally difficult to erase and could easily be found by future employers was a serious concern when they considered engaging with social justice issues in online spaces. This was then compounded by the potentially limitless audiences in online spaces, so that the unique features of digital environments were a major contributor in creating perceived barriers for these students and made them hesitant to address controversial topics.

5.4 The Role of Whiteness

It should be noted that an additional barrier to participants’ engagement with social justice issues (particularly those related to race) relates to the idea of Whiteness. The fact that all of the participants were White is important to keep in mind, as this aspect of their identities directly relates to both their ability and their desire to engage with topics such as racism and White privilege, as I discussed in Chapter 3 above. Indeed, part of the way in which Whiteness maintains a place dominance is that it is self-effacing; as White people, we are taught to see ourselves as un-raced, in contrast to the way that people of colour are constructed as having a particular race. This notion of Whiteness as the absence of race, then, has the effect of making White individuals reticent to discuss race and racism and leads to the perception that these topics are “controversial” or risky. What is somewhat ironic, then, is that the actual level of “risk” White pre-service
teachers generally face in addressing “controversial” issues online is significantly less than it would be for a BIPOC pre-service teacher (just as I, as a White instructor, face less opposition when raising these issues in my courses than a BIPOC instructor would).

In this chapter, then, I presented an ethnographic analysis of online spaces in order to demonstrate how the unique culture of these spaces affected pre-service teachers’ perceptions around addressing social justice issues on digital platforms, and I discussed the role that Whiteness plays in participants’ engagements in online spaces. In the next chapter, I turn to a critical discourse analysis of these students’ understandings of online spaces in order to understand how discourses related to the teaching profession and to modernist perceptions of identity also impact perceptions and create additional barriers to online engagements with controversial topics.
Chapter 6: Discursive Production of Pre-Service Teachers as a Barrier to Online Engagement

In Chapter 5 above, I offered an introduction to my seven participants and then provided an overview and analysis of our interviews that included participant digital identities and social media use, perceptions of online spaces, and past experiences addressing social justice issues online. This ethnographic analysis allowed me to gain a better understanding of the way that the participants understood the unique culture of digital environments. From there, I was able to draw some conclusions about how some specific features of online environments (in particular, the way that online spaces affect the concept of audience and the permanence of online artefacts) led to perceived barriers when it came to participants’ engagement with social justice-related issues in digital spaces.

As I mentioned above, my analysis of the interview data also used a critical discourse analysis (CDA). This analysis, approached from a post-critical perspective, took place both during the course of the interviews themselves, when I worked with participants to identify and unpack particular normative narratives that continued to emerge in our conversations, and after the interviews had concluded. In particular, I noticed that the perceived barriers identified in Chapter 5 above were often either caused or exacerbated by certain dominant narratives surrounding the teaching profession and the concept of identity. Below, I provide the results of my critical discourse analysis.
6.1 Question 2: Results

*How do dominant discourses around teaching, digital spaces, and identity, as well as the discursive production of pre-service teachers, contribute to perceived barriers to engaging with social justice-related topics in open, online spaces?*

As I mentioned above, in answering my second research question, I used CDA to analyze the ways in which particular normative narratives shaped and contributed to the perceived barriers identified above. I focused my analysis on a couple of key areas:

- Narratives surrounding the “good” teacher
- Narratives surrounding online identity and identity in general (in particular, modernist narratives around identity)

The results of my analysis follow.

6.2 Narratives of the “Good” Teacher

Ultimately, I found that many of the barriers described by the participants around addressing social justice issues online were shaped and exacerbated by dominant narratives of the “good” teacher. Thus I begin with this area.

In the review of the literature in Chapter 3 above, I outlined the major discourses of the “good” teacher; specifically, I highlighted the ways in which the good teacher is produced as neutral and value-free, as expert, and as caring, charismatic, and kind. In the course of my research, it became clear that these normative narratives of the “good” teacher were not exclusive to face-to-face settings; indeed, these narratives frequently cropped up in participants’ discussions of digital identity and were often the source of considerable tension. Below, I outline some of these tensions.
It is important to note that while we would expect pre-service teachers to have internalized the dominant discourses around the “good” teacher in offline contexts, the unfamiliar context of social networking sites as professional contexts presents an additional challenge. In describing experiences in new contexts, Madison (2012) draws on Maria Lugones notion of “world travelling” and notes that when we move into unfamiliar “worlds” (in this case, online spaces), we must learn the new rules at play and then decide whether we will follow those rules. Madison notes that we may perform particular stereotypical roles because it is what the new world appears to demand of us, and we may or may not realize that we are doing so. Moreover, she argues that we take up these stereotypes for various reasons, for instance, in order to be accepted (to be subjectivated, as a Foucauldian post-structuralism would say), because we have internalized this particular stereotype, or because it is beneficial to us. Madison (2012) also notes that it takes time to become comfortable with another world and to learn the expected norms. Hence, pre-service teachers who are learning to navigate digital communities for the first time may be unfamiliar with the rules of behaviour and, if they have been successfully subjectivated by the discourse of the “good” teacher as expert (as described below), this unfamiliarity will be a space of discomfort. In turn, this discomfort compounds the difficulties that pre-service teachers already face when engaging in challenging conversations about race, privilege, and other social justice issues, which Marx (2006) argues require a familiar and safe setting.

6.2.1 The “Good” Teacher as Neutral and Value-free in Online Spaces

In the course of my interviews, I noticed that all of the participants reported a significant amount of tension around not wanting to be too “political” online; as I
described above, both the phenomenon of context collapse and the permanence of online artefacts appeared to contribute to this tension. In relation to context collapse, every one of the participants expressed hesitancy around posting about social justice issues online because of the potential to upset or offend some of the people who made up their essentially limitless online audience; similarly, in reference to the permanence of online artefacts, all of the participants worried that this limitless online audience might someday include potential employers who would see their posts in the future and judge them as being too political and therefore undesirable employees (as Kaylene put it, “Who is going to want to hire the person that's just pissing everybody off?”). Essentially, participants were concerned that they would be perceived as too controversial in one way or another.

Much of this stems, I think, from what Britzman (1991) would describe as the common-sense discourse of the “good” teacher as neutral and objective, which I described above in Chapter 3. For the participants, this ingrained understanding was evident in the way they described becoming anti-oppressive educators generally. Brooklyn, for instance, expressed concern about appearing too political: “As a teacher you have to be a little more cautious . . . and you have to kind of gauge if you can approach these [controversial] topics. She told me that it was okay to be somewhat opinionated, “but not super opinionated because I don't want to piss off people.”

Unsurprisingly, then this story of the “good” teacher as neutral bumped up violently against public displays of advocacy for social justice ideals. J, for instance, described how they had learned the narrative of the “good” teacher as neutral from their parents:
I've been advised by my parents mostly to keep my political views out of my professional life. . . . I can just picture my dad going, don't say that in public, you know, don't ever go to a march in public, don't go to pride parades, don't put your face out there anywhere associated with anything that potential employers might find disagreeable. . . . Keep your activism out. Keep your troublemaking out. Keep your not completely 100 percent socially acceptable invisible politics out.

Despite this message, J noted they were comfortable speaking out in a classroom about social justice issues, perhaps because of the anti-oppressive focus of our program. But they felt that doing so online might be perceived as inappropriate. They noted that they were happy to address social justice issues on their Tumblr account (which was not tied to their name in any way) but not on their “professional” social media accounts that were under their real name. This made it clear that the discomfort around being political online was something that they only associated with their online teacher identity; J had no problem discussing controversial things online in settings where it would not be associated with their professional self.

Stephen, meanwhile, admitted that it wasn’t possible to be neutral as a teacher, yet he expressed concern about colouring his students’ opinions of the world. He told me, “I don’t want my students to be shaped by what I have to say or my opinion of it, I guess. I want them to come to their own opinion, and I want them to feel safe in that they can have those opinions without me [penalizing them]”. For Stephen, this danger was compounded online, because students could potentially see anything he posted and might then read into what they saw. He gave this example: “You know, if a student was writing a paper on how Louis Riel was a traitor, and I shared something [online] that [suggested]
he was a hero, I guess, the students would probably think, ‘Oops, I’m screwed.’” It seemed that the online scenario was more troubling to him because anything he put online was then free to be taken up in ways that he could not control.

Josh, too, described what he called the “sanitation” of his digital identity and expressed concern about his online “record,” which he felt could be taken to be unprofessional. He noted that he had been trying lately to be more cautious about what he said, both online and off: “It's sort of been a switch in the way of thinking for me, trying to think to myself, ‘Think before you speak. Think before you speak.’” When I asked him why he felt this need to cleanse his online presence in particular, he told me:

Some of the ideas we're getting in class, especially when we're talking about professionalism, we're talking about [the provincial teacher’s federation] – the code of conduct, the code of ethics — just realizing there are certain things I do that if I really analyzed it – and I do like to analyze things – they would not be good when compared to those expectations and those codes of conduct and codes of ethics.

For Josh, the idea of professionalism became tied up in neutrality, so that the aforementioned cleansing or sanitizing of his digital identity became the logical response.

For many of the participants, then, the narrative of the “good” teacher as neutral or value-free became a concern as they engaged in online platforms. Fear of being perceived as too “political,” a common neoliberal critique of education, became an issue when they considered the idea of discussing social justice issues online.
6.2.2 The “Good” Teacher as Expert in Online Spaces

As I described in Chapter 3 above, a second discourse identified by Britzman (1991) surrounding the “good” teacher is that of needing to be perceived as an expert. Even before I began my research, I was familiar with this tension. Many of my students had expressed concerns about looking “stupid” to future employers because of what they posted online; they felt unable to express uncertainties or to admit to not knowing something in a public, lasting forum. The stakes in online spaces are already high, as many have theorized that participation in these environments is fraught with expectations. Indeed, if we buy into Willinsky’s (2010) contention that networked publics (that is, spaces created through people’s interactions on networked technologies (boyd, 2008a)), are reputational economies which “demand the construction, performance and curation of intelligible public identities as the price of admission” (Stewart, 2013, p. 6), then it is understandable that pre-service teachers would be worried about how they are perceived in these spaces.

My interviews with participants clearly confirmed that this discourse of the “good” teacher was particularly troubling to the students as they thought about engaging with social justice issues online, because the students already felt as though they were far from mastering the role of anti-oppressive educator, while at the same time paradoxically acknowledging Kumashiro’s (2009) assertion that one can never become fully anti-oppressive but that one is instead always in the process of becoming. There were myriad examples of this tension. For instance, when I asked Stephen if he felt prepared to teach anti-oppressively, he noted,
No . . . I just still don’t know what it entails, on a practical level. I get the idea I think of it. But I need to see ways that can play out or strategies to make sure you’re not being oppressive, just ways of teaching. [For instance], we could maybe look at chunks of [the curriculum] and say okay, how might this be taught [anti-oppressively]? And then oppressively? And how can we make sure we’re not teaching it the way it shouldn’t be taught. . . . I want to do things properly. Stephen’s language frequently revealed a strong desire to be correct or to have the right answer. He went on to describe his concerns with not addressing a particular topic in the correct, anti-oppressive way:

Sometimes I worry about the message that it would send if I tried to teach a lesson about sexual identity and it falls flat. What is that saying? The teacher fumbled with the idea of being a homosexual, so what does that make the teacher, or what does that make [students] think the teacher is thinking about it, I guess. I would worry what message I’d [be] sending if I screwed up a lesson on homosexuality, or whatever. . . . I don’t know. I just have no idea how to deal with it or whatever, or no idea how to present it properly.

When I asked him what he meant by “properly,” he replied, “I don’t know. Something that makes the students come to this amazing realization. Changes their lives forever I guess.”

Brooklyn, similarly, noted that she still felt uncomfortable about teaching anti-oppressively because she was not yet an expert:

I don't feel like I have the knowledge base to be comfortable in it because I'm so new to a lot of these concepts that I won't be a perfect anti-oppressive educator.
[Someday] I can be a half-decent to a good one. But that's through time and that's through talking and . . . educating myself because that was a big thing that was missing for 18 years [of my life].

Raquel, meanwhile, gave the example of feeling the need to be an expert when addressing treaty education, noting that there was “so much fear of saying something wrong, doing something wrong.”

Samantha, too, expressed this tension frequently. When we discussed the idea that she would never truly become an anti-oppressive educator, she told me that her discomfort with the concept stemmed perhaps “from being ingrained in [an education system] where there are correct and wrong answers.” She added, ”You can [have] finished a lesson plan and feel like, ‘Okay, I have a solid lesson plan. This is good. This is done.’ Whereas things like racism and sexism, the -isms, you're never done. It's a lot more difficult to unpack those things when they're not ever complete.”

Evidently, Stephen, Brooklyn, Raquel, and Samantha already felt some discomfort when trying to reconcile the dominant discourse of the “good” teacher as expert with the impossibility of ever fully attaining the goal of being an anti-oppressive education. It was unsurprising, then, that this discomfort was amplified when the students considered the idea of being anti-oppressive in online spaces, through actions such as posting about social justice issues.

For Stephen, even the thought of developing a digital identity was fraught with anxiety over not doing it correctly. Several interviews in, he noted, “I’m seeing a lot of the positives in what having a digital identity would be, but I don’t think I have the skills or the know-how to do digital identity properly.” He expressed a desire for a “guide” that
would lay out the correct way of going about building a digital identity for education. Of
Twitter, specifically, Stephen noted:

> You have to construct this group of people around you and that takes like a lot of
time to seek people out and . . . create this group of people that actually will care
what we have to tweet. So . . . it’s just a lot of work to get started. And then the
upkeep of it. . . . I would feel bad being somebody who would just absorb what
others are saying without contributing my own stuff. So I think it would end up
becoming a chore to make my weekly or daily tweet. . . . I think that the whole
implicit thing in Twitter is that you give as much as you take, at least if you’re in
the education sphere. Everybody I’ve ever looked up education-wise is sharing
other stuff and having some pretty good conversations on Twitter. So I think the
way that I use Facebook where I’m just absorbing, flipping through, wouldn’t
really translate to Twitter.

For Stephen, then, both the act of being an anti-oppressive educator and the act of
participating in online spaces were complicated by a perceived need to be an expert and
to do things correctly. Thus, the intersection of the two (engaging anti-oppressively
online) felt like an impossibility.

J, too, struggled with the intersection of the two identities, though they felt fairly
confident in each element in isolation. They identified a feeling of fear that they
associated with being perceived as an expert:

> On my Tumblr, I talk and I write about anti-oppressive things fairly regularly in
response to other conversations that are going on. Occasionally, I'll make my own
but then even more rarely, someone will decide to ask me a question because
they've read my blog or some of these posts and they've decided I'm sufficiently knowledgeable that they want to ask me . . . when that happens, I am immediately far more nervous about writing that response than I am if I had been writing my own post unprompted because I feel like I'm being held to a higher standard because I've been acknowledged as an expert.

While J’s Tumblr account was not associated with their real name, J still struggled with having to address social justice issues when acting in the role of a perceived “expert,” so it made sense that they would feel uncomfortable engaging with social justice-related topics on their professional, teacher accounts. J noted that they would look for cues from peers when trying to do so:

When I was blogging for some of my ECS classes, I would always look at other people's blogs first to see everything from, How did they set this up? Did they put an introductory post on here? What sort of information are they revealing? How are they talking about stuff in their posts? Are they explicitly referencing that this is for a class and we were discussing this chapter, or are they just giving their thoughts on this material as if they decide to do it independently? … It's an anxiety thing [because] I don't feel completely confident in what I'm doing, in how right I am . . . when I'm talking as a teacher. . . . So I suppose I'm more afraid to screw up when I have the teacher hat on than when I'm talking, speaking as myself.

Clearly, J felt uncomfortable when they were situated at the intersection of the two roles.

Other participants identified a similar discomfort with engaging in social justice issues online in their capacities as educators, due to this same sense of needing to be an
expert. Raquel noted that when deciding whether or not to post about a potentially controversial issue on Twitter, “I think it depends on how knowledgeable I’m feeling about the topic.” Josh, meanwhile, told me that he would feel better about engaging in those issues online when he was “a little bit more surefooted and purposeful in the education community at large.” When I asked him why, he responded, “I don't like being wrong. I like being able to back up my answers. I like being able to have an argument and be able to stick to it.” He described a particular instance of not wanting to put something online until he was totally confident in it, leading to the following exchange:

**Josh:** I actually started to write a blogpost close to the end of last semester about viewing myself as a treaty person where I actually stood on that continuum, and I haven't finished it yet because I've had a lot more input in the last two months about what a treaty person actually is and what we look like, and oh wait a minute, it's all of us. There's more information I feel I need to gather before I can continue with that post.

**Katia:** Why?

**Josh:** Because I'm a perfectionist.

**Katia:** So you can't post because it's not correct yet?

**Josh:** I just don't know it's complete enough for me yet. I don't know, you can't be correct about that topic.

**Katia:** But you can be complete?

**Josh:** I can be more complete.

Here again, Josh’s unwillingness to be perceived as less than an expert made it difficult for him to engage with social justice issues online.

Finally, Samantha described this same tension when considering the possibility of a future employer seeing the posts that related to anti-oppressive education on her blog. She noted that she tried to provide a disclaimer when writing about potentially
controversial topics, saying, “I always kind of leave my blog on a note like, "This is in progress and . . . it's not stopping here. And I hope that anyone who would read that . . . would get that impression that I'm still working through these things.” When I asked if, in the future, she would consider deleting posts that made her appear to be less than an expert on social justice issues in preparation for interviewing for a teaching position, she noted that it would depend on if she felt that she had now reached a more expert status or whether she still felt that she was struggling:

It depends where I'm at at that point because if I feel like I've really made a lot of growth, maybe it is good to look back [and demonstrate my growth in addressing that area]. But if I'm still fixing those inner demons and trying to figure out what's going on in my head, it might be really embarrassing to admit, "Hey, I'm still struggling with this." During a job interview? That's really personal and really honest. But at the same time, what if I'm revealing that I don't feel ready to be a teacher?

For Samantha, as a pre-service teacher it was acceptable, if still uncomfortable, to be perceived as a non-expert on topics related to anti-oppressive education because she saw this as an appropriate stage in her journey. However, once she became a full-fledged teacher, it was no longer acceptable to acknowledge her struggles in this area unless she could demonstrate that she was, in fact, now more of an expert. Thus, while Samantha’s thinking on the topic differed somewhat from some of my other participants, she still, like the others, found it difficult to reconcile the need for teachers to be experts with the messiness and incompleteness of anti-oppressive education, complicating the act of engaging with social justice issues online.
6.2.3 The “Good” Teacher as Caring and Kind in Online Spaces

In addition to the dominant discourses of the “good” teacher as expert and neutral, Britzman (1991) identifies the narrative of the “good” teacher as necessarily caring and kind; as I noted above in Chapter 3, the dominant narrative positions teaching as a feminine profession, leading to the perception that teachers must take up traditionally feminine traits such as nurturing and caregiving. For the participants, this discourse of the “good” teacher appeared to play a role in the students’ avoidance of situations that would lead to conflict or other negative interactions, which they perceived as antithetical to the image of the caring and kind educator.

This image of the “good” teacher as kind and nurturing was expressed by numerous participants as they described the kind of educator they wanted to be. Brooklyn, for instance, described her role in the classroom as that of a mother:

I take care of my kids. And I think that's a big part of it. All my practicums have kind of been like that. They have become my kids as of the first week. I care for them deeply. I still care about my kids [from an earlier practicum], and I haven't seen them for two years. And I think a big part of my teacher identity is that motherly figure, or someone that [students] can come to and feel that compassion and that care.

When I asked Samantha to describe a good teacher, she gave a similar response:

I'd say caring. As simple as that is. . . . I think it's important for teachers to be a person that they could go to for help just in case. Caring is important that way because I think we need to be someone who is personable and not just there to
teach, even though that is our job description: to teach. I think [being caring] is equally as important.

Certainly, it is unsurprising that participants associated the teaching profession with caring, but the emphasis that they placed on this aspect of the role of the educator make it clear that this normative narrative was deeply ingrained.

It makes sense, then, that participants expressed discomfort around the idea of offending others online, as doing so online was much more public; moreover, as I noted in Chapter 5 above, the context collapse that is evident in online spaces made it difficult for the students to keep their discussions of social justice issues limited to their peers and others who were already engaged in these types of conversations, elevating the risk that family members and friends might see the participants’ posts. Raquel, for instance, noted that when she tweeted or retweeted others’ tweets about potentially controversial issues, she chose carefully: “I guess I try to pick ones that show what I support, but not too far. Or I don’t want to – I guess it goes back to how I don’t want to offend anyone.” She recalled a time where she wanted to address a photo shared by a high school acquaintance on Facebook that showed the friend wearing a racist costume, and she noted that she was unsure of how to go about it:

How do you frame it so it’s not a personal attack? That’s what I was worried about - I don’t know her that well. I just graduated with her, but how do I say, I am so not okay with your costume without hurting her or someone [seeing my comment and telling me] ‘It’s none of your business.’

Though Raquel was uncomfortable with the content of the post, her desire to avoid potential conflict or to be seen as uncaring made it difficult for her to speak out.
Samantha and I, meanwhile, discussed her unwillingness to disagree with others who shared potentially problematic viewpoints on Twitter; when I asked her why she did not generally respond to them, she replied, “I haven’t been a big one for confrontation.”

When I asked J about why they hesitated to engage with, for example, social justice-related hashtag discussions on their professional Twitter account, they told me that they would often use harsher, and sometimes vulgar, language in these discussions, and this didn’t fit with the level of “decorum” required of a teacher:

Looking back, thinking about that more clearly, I don't know what that's about...Part of it could be that when I participate in hashtag discussions for example, my language tends to be less formal. Sometimes it's vulgar. Not always, but some things I'm angry about. And there are also sometimes arguments with I guess trolls, or people who, well, disagree is a light word for it. . . . Yes. And those can go bad really fast. So that's something I kind of don't want or think should not be on my professional account. I guess just the fact that those discussions tend to be a lot more or a lot less formal. It's not something I did consciously, but now looking at it, I'd say because that's part of my conception of what it means to be professional, is to maintain a certain level of decorum, and a certain linguistic level, things like that. I'd be the first to defend the abbreviations and slang and things like that that get used on places like Twitter [as] perfectly acceptable and necessary given the medium. But yet, I don't do that in practice on my professional account.
In other words, J felt the harsh language didn’t match up with the caring and kind-hearted persona required of the “good” teacher, despite simultaneously arguing that this type of language was sometimes necessary and acceptable.

In considering the tension caused by this last facet of the “good” teacher, J used the term “tough love” to describe the apparent conflict: the need in anti-oppressive education for learners to be pushed out of their comfort zones and to engage in discomforting learning, coupled with the need for teachers in caring and kind ways. J noted, “You almost can’t reconcile [the two positions]. I mean, you can in the sense of... well, tough love again. That’s, I guess, the only way to really reconcile. Loving someone or caring about someone, and causing them discomfort deliberately. . .” As J explained, taking up the role of anti-oppressive educator meant letting go, in a sense, of the notion of the “good” teacher as kind-hearted and conflict-free: “That does require either changing your discourse – basically changing the foundation of who you think you are as a person or at least as a teacher-self — or you reject that discourse [of the ‘good’ teacher].”

**6.2.4 Discursive Productions of the “Good” Teacher in Tension with Anti-oppressive Education**

As I discussed above in Chapter 2, the discourses that are present in any particular area function to shape that area and to enforce certain norms of behaviour. From a post-structural perspective, one may only be recognized as a subject when one has taken up the appropriate normative discourses in the “double move” of subjectivation, where one “simultaneously master[s] and become[s] mastered by” the discourse in question (Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2010, p. 336). For the participants, being recognized as the “good”
teacher meant taking up the discourses described above, while at the same time being constrained by these discourses. However, when the students were asked to perform the role of anti-oppressive educator, these same discourses became sources of tension as the idea of being neutral, expert, and conflict-free contradicted with the discourses surrounding anti-oppressive education; thus, students became caught in the midst of the two subject positions. In face-to-face conflicts, this disconnect was already a considerable source of tension; when the added dimension of online engagement with social justice issues was introduced, this tension became more pronounced because of the very public and permanent nature of digital environments. Thus, as I discuss in Chapter 7 below, additional structures and strategies might be helpful in supporting students as they navigate this issue.

6.3 The Fixed Subject and the “Good” Teacher in Online Spaces

As I demonstrated above, the discursive production of the “good” teacher as apolitical, expert, and kind-hearted complicated the ways in which participants were able to take up the role of anti-oppressive educator, and this conflict was compounded by the unique characteristics of online environments such as context collapse and boyd’s (2008a; 2014) quartet of persistence, replicability, scalability, and searchability. In addition, however, the discursive production of the subject itself contributed to the perceived barriers that participants identified as they considered engaging online with social justice issues. Specifically, the modernist notion of the subject as a fixed and unitary entity made it difficult for participants to conceive of their online identities as
being in flux or demonstrating growth, which in turn made them wary of doing or saying the wrong thing in the digital sphere.

As I described in detail in Chapter 2 above, the modernist/humanist understanding of the subject takes for granted a core, unchangeable identity of self (Henriques et al., 1998; Venn, 1998). This core self is, moreover, defined in terms of binary oppositions, so that one is because of what one is not (St. Pierre, 2000); one is, for instance, female because one is not male, old because one is not young, White because one is not Black. Because these binary oppositions are steeped in value judgements, the idea of identity is similarly reduced to stark assessments of privilege vs. marginalization: good or bad, smart or dumb, masculine vs. feminine, where the former of each pair is placed in contrast to the latter.

Such an understanding of identity has certainly been challenged in contemporary thought, including by scholars in the areas of post-modernism and post-structuralism. Moreover, as I noted in Chapter 2, the advent of the Internet age was initially heralded as a brave new world of performance and identity play made possible by digital technologies. However, thanks in part to the digital dualism (Jurgenson, 2011) that marks offline identity as “authentic,” many in our society have returned to the belief that a fixed modernist subject does indeed exist and that we can therefore judge others based on this “real” and unchanging identity. Interestingly, while digital dualism marks offline spaces and identities as “authentic” (in contrast to online spaces), we have seen online identities being interpreted (and then judged) through the same modernist lens of the fixed self.

The interpretation of online identities as fixed and unchangeable has significant consequences for anyone using digital spaces, as mistakes in the digital realm are seen as
marks on our permanent records (Godin, 2009). If our identities are set in stone, then any misstep becomes a sure sign of our bad character. In one of our conversations, J described the way that they had seen this play out on Tumblr, where someone who was previously seen as a knowledgeable source on a topic could have that reputation destroyed by a single post:

These people position themselves and are positioned by the community as experts and every so often, quite regularly, actually, almost invariably, I guess, someone screws up. They screw up . . . and they're trying to speak as an authority, they screw up and they get torn down because for a community of activists on Tumblr, there is a great deal of -- there can be a great deal of intolerance . . . the idea that if you screw up, you need to be called out, you need to be shut down, you need to be removed from your position of power.

J added that even if the mistake or misstep was related to a particular area, the person’s expertise in all areas would be called into question:

People will stop re-blogging things from this person because [for example] they are ableist, even if what they're mostly blogging about is racism. Some of the harassment that comes out of that by other activists, as they turn on this person is vicious. There's a tendency for blogs to be deleted, for mods to be kicked off the blog entirely, for people to lock or erase their personal blogs, even when the fall out turns there. I guess that having been the culture that I learned . . . that fear is there.
In J’s experience, then, a digital mistake was taken not just as a sign of permanent identity, but it also became all-encompassing, negating all other facets of a person’s self and work.

In a 2016 article, Dr. Alec Couros and I described the ways in which the modernist understanding of identity as fixed could play out negatively in academia:

For scholars, issues of identity are particularly problematic particularly when it comes to the ability to speak to controversial or difficult issues. Indeed, while the tenure system is intended to protect scholars’ academic freedom, it cannot protect scholars from cyber-vigilantes who take every post or tweet as an indelible marker of character. In recent months, we have seen considerable backlash when academics have chosen to speak about socio-cultural issues on social networks, as in the cases of Sarah Goldrick-Rab (Jaschik, 2015) and Steven Salaita (Guarino, 2014). There exists a profound risk, then, that the climate of digital culture, where identity is perceived not as shifting or context dependent, but rather as an expression of a core self, may lead academics to self-censor and in turn bring out a silencing of important conversations. (Hildebrandt & Couros, 2016, p. 93-94)

For academics, even those with tenure, the potential repercussions can be a deterrent while deciding whether or not to engage with social justice issues online.

Unsurprisingly, then, pre-service teachers experience similar issues around the way that their online interactions are perceived. Here again, Kumashiro’s (2009) writing on the impossibility of attaining the ideal of anti-oppressive educator comes into play; if we can never truly be anti-oppressive, then it is troubling that others might read our comments online and see them not as steps in the process of becoming but as the
terminus of their teacher-selves. For the participants, the possibility that online comments and posts might be judged not as signs of learning but as evidence of an unchangeable self made it difficult for the students to express vulnerabilities or to step outside of their comfort zones when engaging with potentially controversial topics online; this possible judgement compounded existing concerns the participants had around living up to the discourse of the “good” teacher as expert, which I described above.

Brooklyn described this concern that an offhand comment might be taken as a sign of character, saying, “People can hold you to it a lot more on the internet versus in reality because if you just make a snide comment in the hallway, it's kind of there and gone, whereas if you do a snide comment on the internet, it's there [forever]. When asked about why a comment held more weight or was ascribed more meaning online, she noted, “People can sit there and look at what you did and they can dwell on it and they can screenshot it or they can copy it or do whatever to it, whereas in reality if you have a conversation, it's kind of – it's out there. It's not written in stone.” Samantha, too, expressed the worry that some minor phrase or comment might be “forever something that's attached to who I am as a teacher.” For Josh, the idea that a piece of his writing might be taken as such an important indicator of his identity was troubling because he preferred to constantly update his work as he learned new things and gathered more information:

Every single time I revisit a piece I think about different things, especially if I've had more of an education on a topic or been forced to revisit assumptions or revisit things I've heard or anything like that. I will change something about my writing every single time I go back to it.
The idea that works in progress would be seen with such finality clearly made it very
difficult for the participants to be open about the learning process.

In this chapter, I used critical discourse analysis to address my second research
question, *How do dominant discourses around teaching, digital spaces, and identity, as
well as the discursive production of pre-service teachers, contribute to perceived barriers
to engaging with social justice-related topics in open, online spaces?* In answering this
question, I analyzed the ways in which participants spoke and thought about both the
identity of the “good” teacher and the idea of identity more generally, in order to
demonstrate the ways in which dominant discourses around teaching, identity, and online
spaces affected how participants engaged in social justice issues in digital spaces; I noted
that the discourses that produce “good” teachers as neutral, expert, and caring, as well as
modernist understandings of the self, complicate this process. I also described the ways in
which these discourses compounded the tensions created by the characteristics of online
spaces described in Chapter 5 above. In the next and final chapter, I describe some
potential ways forward that address the barriers to engaging with social justice issues in
online spaces that I have identified in Chapters 5 and 6, as well as reflecting on the
research more generally.
Chapter 7: Where Do We Go from Here?

In Chapters 5 and 6 above, I analyzed the interview data in order to better understand how my pre-service teacher participants perceived the online world, especially as that world overlapped with social justice issues, and how these perceptions led students to perceive barriers to engaging with “controversial” or difficult topics in digital spaces, stemming in particular from some of the unique characteristics of online spaces. As well, I discussed the ways in which various discourses (including normative understandings of the good teacher/student, online spaces, and identity) contributed to these perceived barriers.

In this chapter, I turn to several areas of possibility: potential avenues for supporting students as they engage with social justice issues online, as suggested by the interview data.

7.1 Question 3: Results

How might we better support students in becoming active anti-oppressive educators online?

To answer my final research question, I noted several themes and patterns in my interviews with participants that related to supporting students. That is, several of the participants spoke of various strategies or techniques that had been used in classes and in our interviews themselves that made it easier or less intimidating to act as anti-oppressive educators in online spaces. In particular, I kept track of the following areas:

- Ways of structuring course environments to support students
- The benefits of unpacking and disrupting normative narratives alongside students
● The importance of performing particular identities in online spaces, and

concomitant possibilities offered by post-structural understandings of agency

The first area listed above suggests how teacher educators might mitigate the difficulties
caused by characteristics of online spaces such as collapsed contexts and the permanence
of online content. The second and third areas, meanwhile, provide insight into how we
can help students to grapple with the normative discourses surrounding identity and
teaching in order to help them better navigate the tensions of these discursive spaces.

7.2 Implications for Course Design and Learning Environments

As I noted in Chapter 5 above, the participants identified particular elements of
online contexts that led to perceived barriers when engaging in social justice issues. In
particular, many expressed fears about the potentially limitless audience of digital
environments, where a lack of context made it difficult to communicate as we do in face-
to-face situations where we can present ourselves in response to a specific audience and
situation. As well, participants expressed concerns about the permanence of online
artefacts in a world where our digital identities are often judged both rashly and harshly.
Hence, I began to take note of the elements that participants identified as supports that
made it easier for them to engage online. These ranged from structural features of
specific classes to larger ideas related to faculty supports.

7.2.1 Communities of Learning and Discomfort

The most significant theme that emerged was the importance of online

communities to support students’ forays into addressing social justice issues online. That
is, a majority of the participants noted that it was very helpful to have digital spaces (such as blog hubs or course-related Twitter hashtags) that were specifically designed to act as learning communities. For participants, these spaces provided a sort of safe harbour, a somewhat sheltered place within the larger online world where they could practice engaging in difficult conversations — Samantha described these digital course spaces as “communities of discomfort.”

Stephen, despite his ambivalence towards blogging, acknowledged that the blog hubs provided a safe space for students to learn from one another and build on each other’s thinking:

I guess [blogging] offered people a way to think about what the other’s saying and give their own opinion. [It] could have easily led to [someone thinking], what you’re saying relates a lot to what this other guy’s saying, you should read his blog. More of a network going on, I guess.

Raquel, similarly, saw the blog hubs as an opportunity to learn from others: “I was able to connect with all these people and get feedback [where] if I was writing in a journal, I’m in my own little bubble. . . . It feels like the process of blogging really extends the learning.”

Samantha, too, saw the blog hubs as supportive spaces for learning and described feeling a sort of comfort in working through controversial topics among her peers:

My peers are all struggling with the same questions and same things [on their blogs], and I feel like I'm kind of – I'm on the same page. I don't feel like I'm falling behind, and I don't feel like I'm less knowledgeable than anyone else. I feel like we're kind of on the same page and everyone's working through the same
And I feel like my professors admire the working through of thoughts. Even if they're not fully developed. And they aren't fully correct. I feel like the fact that I'm working them out is okay.

For Samantha, the community of learning that was created by the blog hubs was a safe space for growth. Interestingly, we can see that she also identified the community as a place where she could escape the discourse of the “good” teacher as expert; it allowed her to be comfortable in the process of becoming an anti-oppressive educator online.

Samantha also noted that the context of the course provided a sort of safety net for her. She described it a sort of institutional backing that made risk-taking easier:

I feel like everything I have said that has been maybe troubling to me has been backed up by textbook proof. Or class proof? Or peer proof. Or some kind of other source that's telling me why I'm questioning this. Or why it's okay to be questioning this. If anyone would say, ‘Oh, why are you thinking this?’ ‘Well, the textbook is asking me to.’

Brooklyn, similarly, noted that she didn’t feel nervous about potentially controversial posts when they were written as part of a course. When discussing a post of White privilege, she told me:

I think they'll associate [the post] with a class — this is an assignment that you had to reflect on versus you put this up by yourself. . . . . It was an educational assignment by an academic institution, and that's a lot more accepted than my opinions.

J, too, expressed similar feelings around engaging with social justice issues online as part of a class. As I described above, J reported having difficulty in taking up social justice
issues in online spaces that they associated with their teacher identity, such as Twitter. When I asked why they had felt comfortable doing so in the ECS210 course, they noted, “Partially because we'd been asked or encouraged to. . . it was in the context of discussions on pedagogy and things like that. [The posts] were relevant to the learning we were doing at the time.” For J, the ECS210 hashtag on Twitter became a space where it was possible to practice engaging online in the role of anti-oppressive educator.

Kaylene noted that having a community of learners helped her to push the boundaries in terms of what she felt comfortable posting about online, including her ability to call out racist content:

> You know I actually feel like I have more of a supported platform now, especially, like, in our university space to act on things and feel as though there are people standing behind me… I think I would still go about it in the same way, but you can take it further when you feel like you have support.

Josh also noted that he felt it was easier to confront racist or otherwise inappropriate posts when doing so amidst a community of his peers. He told me, “It would probably help if I had backup. Again, common sense. If you're the only one standing there it's a lot more difficult to stand up against somebody.”

Samantha noted that she would have a much harder time posting about social justice issues on her blog if it were not part of a class:

> If you didn't have that, it would just be, "This is just a me thing and a no one else thing." And I think it just reaffirms that these are the struggles you have to go . . . these are the questions that are important to be asking yourself. And to have a prof there prompting those questions is really important. And if it was just me
struggling with these issues, I'd be like, "I am so lost. I feel like everyone else is on a different page as me." So I think it just reinforces the idea that these struggles are necessary. . . . It's like a community of discomfort almost.

J also spoke of the difference between engaging with social justice issues online alone vs. as part of a class:

It feels like the difference between how it's okay to speak up in a small group conversation, but it's much harder to put your hand up and be the only one to shout out an answer in a lecture hall, or to go up and give a presentation. It's not the exact same context, but that's what it feels like…. So it's easier when there are other people doing it as well. . . . You have the support of your professor and of your peers.”

For many participants, then, the online communities created by blog hubs or by course Twitter hashtags were key factors in their perceived ability to engage with social justice issues online. This suggests that building these types of communities into courses for pre-service teachers might offer a safe place for students to practice taking up the role of anti-oppressive educators in online spaces.

7.2.2 The Importance of Power and Authority

Another area to consider when thinking about supporting students is the role of power and authority in online spaces. Specifically, Brooklyn, Raquel, Josh, and J noted that it was easier to engage with social justice issues when they could tap into some other source of power and authority. For example, Brooklyn, who was running for a position in the university’s student union at the time of our interviews, noted that if she were to win,
she would feel more comfortable posting potentially controversial content on her official student representative social media accounts than on her personal accounts, in particular when it came to her family seeing her online content:

I think it would give me a little bit more weight with my family, because they would see, okay, you're in a position of power now, you're doing this for a reason, whereas before they'd just think, oh, you're just going against – I don't know, it's weird. My family has weird thoughts. But they really respect people with power.

Raquel, meanwhile, noted it was easier for her to post an article written by a scholar or other respected figure than to post her own content, and that sharing something that had already been widely shared (and therefore seemingly endorsed by others) was more comfortable:

I guess that would be like baby steps. . . . [When] I’m posting an article, [it implies that] I support this or this is how I’m thinking about this issue, but it’s not as personal as coming from my fingertips. And if someone’s written this article and lots of people are sharing, and like it’s been shared, it’s like, it seems like it has more grounds, like oh, lots of people must agree with this.

In both cases, having some sort of perceived power or authority backing them up made it easier for the students to engage with social justice issues.

This also suggests that there is great potential in the role of the course instructor, and faculty members in general. When dealing with social justice issues online, participants found it much easier to retweet or otherwise share posts originally made by their instructors. For these pre-service teachers, who occupy a liminal space, somewhere between student and educator, it helped to have the weight of someone with more social
standing and authority. Josh, for instance, noted that retweeting a professor “gives you that little bit of a shield if you're worried about it.” J, similarly, noted that doing so was more comfortable “because it would feel like – having been vetted already by another professional. That would be okay. This is acceptable.” This suggests that instructors of courses that incorporate online spaces (such as the blog hubs or Twitter hashtags mentioned above) might help students feel more comfortable engaging with social justice issues in these spaces by modeling this type of engagement themselves (and thereby also providing content for students to re-share or interact with).

### 7.2.3 Other Supports

A few other ideas related to supporting students in their online engagement with social justice issues came up in my participant interviews. One possibility mentioned by participants was the idea of moving to a pass/fail grading system for classes dealing with anti-oppressive content. Stephen, for instance, argued that when he blogged for classes attached to a numerical grade, he felt the need to give the perceived “correct” response and thus was unlikely to push past his comfort zone. He noted:

> I still think that the marking thing provides problems for really taking risks. I think a lot of people would share that opinion, too. If you want classes where you really want people to take risks, make it pass/fail, I guess. . . . With pass/fail, that would allow me to worry less about what the prof thinks, then focus more on what I think.

For Stephen, the move to a pass/fail grading system would help to create a safer space for students to practice engaging with controversial content.
A second concern was the need for strong technical supports to ensure that students felt confident with the process of blogging itself. Several participants noted that engaging with social justice issues online was already outside of their comfort zone, and so it was overwhelming to imagine doing so via a medium that they felt unsure about; essentially, participants were only willing to be uncomfortable with one task at a time. Thus, providing technical training and support in the mechanics of blogging might be an important step. Kaylene went a step farther than other participants and noted that it would also be helpful to prepare students for the potential consequences of engaging in social justice issues on sites like Twitter; as an example, she said, “Maybe along with the teaching of sharing those types of posts, have a seminar on how to not get doxed.” While this example is admittedly a bit extreme, it does suggest the need for students to be introduced to how to deal with trolls and other negative online phenomena.

The ideas described above provide a possible starting point for ensuring that students feel supported and safe as they practice engaging with social justice issues in online spaces. They also help to mitigate the tensions that stem from the unique features of online environments, as described in Chapter 5 above.

7.3 Disrupting Normative Narratives

Both Kumashiro (2009) and Britzman (1991) stress the importance of helping pre-service teachers acknowledge the ways in which their identities have been produced and shaped by dominant, potentially oppressive discourses. Indeed, if “we teach who we are” (Palmer, 2007, para. 1), then it is important for pre-service teachers to be critical readers of their own biographies, in order to understand how they have been shaped by
discourses of race, class, and gender (Britzman, 1991). Kumashiro (2009) adds that the commonsense view often shared by pre-service teacher when they are confronted by the idea of a hidden, unintended, and sometimes oppressive curriculum is that teachers should simply be more careful about what they say and how they say it; however, instead of hiding our values in the hopes that they can be ignored, “we need to put front and center the very things we do not want in our teaching, the very things we do not even know are in our teaching” (p. 41). This involves, among other things, opening a discussion of the ways in which “truth” and knowledge are constructed and are therefore never free of values, so that we can begin to ask how it is that we come to know and value certainly things (Britzman, 1991).

A second potential avenue for supporting students, then, is to recognize the power and importance of helping students to unpack and disrupt normative narratives, such as the narratives surrounding the “good” teacher and related digital spaces and identities described in Chapter 6. The significance of this work arose repeatedly in my participant interviews, as the students came to understand the normative narratives that were enmeshed with the ways in which they spoke about engaging online as anti-oppressive educators. Indeed, many of the participants came to recognize the benefits of this unpacking process and noted that it helped them to better understand the tensions that they were feeling around teacher identity in online spaces. Kaylene, for instance, likened the interview process to a “therapy session,” a time where she would “just get to unpack.” For many, the experience was difficult or uncomfortable at times, but they acknowledged both the challenges and benefits of doing the work of unpacking. Brooklyn, for instance, described her experience in this way:
It was very uncomfortable. It was a lot of talking. It was a lot of brain power. . . .

[But] if you're staying in your comfortable area, it's really hard for you to learn and see other perspectives in different ways, but you need that discomfort. And then you need the reflection and time to unpack it.

Stephen, too, noted both the discomfort and the benefits he had experienced:

I personally have appreciated the whole having to face things that I've lived with and I've enjoyed the whole time because otherwise I wouldn't have, and I would never have seen that. . . . While it might have hurt at first, it's necessary. And yeah, I don't know. There's no way around it.

For some of the participants, then, the experience of being pushed to unpack the ways in which they took up normative narratives in their everyday speech and thinking was uncomfortable, but also rewarding.

With practice, some participants were also better able to catch their own complicity in normative narratives by recognizing the discourses that shaped their responses. Thus, the experience of the interviews had led to a change in their thought processes. Samantha, for example, highlighted how the interviews had kick-started a new way of thinking for her. She told me:

Your job is to trouble my knowledge and be disruptive – ever since that's been happening, I've been thinking about it more and how to counteract that subconscious thinking. You don't realize it until someone else brings it up before you.

Brooklyn, meanwhile, was able to identify the way that she herself brought into the narrative that Indigenous students had an easier time getting into the education program
because of their status as a minority group. She noted, “That’s my past trying to speak. . .
I’ve changed a lot, but you still have these tendencies and these embedded stereotypes.
It’s just the way you think.” Stephen, too, recognized how important it was for him to be able to catch himself as he got caught up in normative narratives as an educator. He noted:

It's infinitely worse to do it and not realize it's happening. So if I realize it's happening, I can make changes. And perhaps even just fearing it happening so much is going to make it not happen because I'm going to be hyper aware of it.

Along the same lines, Josh noted that he, too, was working to unpack his own language:

You don't realize necessarily how ingrained racism and social injustice, social inequality are until you look for [them] in conversations. I started looking for [them] a little bit more, at least being sensitive to [them] when I was talking with my friends or talking with acquaintances.

Finally, J spoke about the ways in which the unpacking we did during the interviews had shifted their understandings of digital spaces and identities specifically:

Having been here and talked about these things, it’s made me start thinking about the way I do things. It’s the reflection that gets you, because you can’t talk about something without thinking about it. . . . And if you are obligated to talk about something in a way you haven’t talked about it before, then that has to change the way you think about it, at least a little bit. . . . I would not have thought of those things if we hadn't had these discussions.
Thus, for several of the participants, these interviews allowed them to reconsider the way they thought about particular discourses, such as those around teaching, anti-oppressive education, and online spaces.

Ultimately, if, as teachers, we see the recognition of our own biases, lenses, and complicity in dominant discourses as an important step in the journey of an anti-oppressive educator, as Kumashiro (2009) suggests we should, then this work of learning to unpack the discursive patterns that shape our speech and thought is a worthwhile activity, and one that we might consider bringing into our teacher education classes. For the participants, at least, the process of unpacking was key to helping them to identify and disrupt normative narratives in order to both move beyond the boundaries of the discursive production of the “good” teacher, and to address racist, sexist, and other problematic patterns in their language and thoughts. This process is particularly important when we consider the discourses surrounding race and Whiteness; given the way that White individuals, pre-service teachers included, are conditioned to ignore the issue of race, the task of unpacking these narratives should be seen as a priority.

7.4 Performing the Role of Anti-Oppressive Educator in Online Spaces

A final avenue of exploration involves the possibilities offered by the post-structural concept of subjectivity. As I noted above in Chapter 2, in a post-structural understanding of identity, subjects are produced in the double-move of subjectivation; they become subjects of a particular discourse (that is, they are able to take up a particular identity) in the moment that they are both recognized/recognizable and constrained by that same discourse. In such a move, the subject is conferred the agency
accorded to that subject position, while also being subjected to limits placed on that subject by discourse. In such an understanding, subjectivity is the product of repetitive acts, or performances, rather than a fixed, pre-given thing. Of course, the ability to perform a particular subject position is constrained by normative discourses (Butler, 1990), and our performance of this subject position must be intelligible within the existing discursive boundaries of that subject (Butler, 1997). However, this leaves open the potential power of performing particular identities in the quest for subjectivation. In other words, the act of performing the role of anti-oppressive educator might be a potential pathway to taking up this subject position, and indeed, this possibility was raised by several participants.

7.4.1 The Potential of Performance

Over the course of my interviews, the participants discussed their initial forays into engaging with social justice issues online, and several of them described these early experiences in terms of performance. That is, many of the participants told me that when they were first asked to engage with this content in online spaces, they were merely performing the role of anti-oppressive educator because it was expected of them.

One such activity was the task of tweeting about the anti-oppressive course content as part of the ECS210 class, which was highly encouraged though not required by the instructors. When discussing their participation on the course hashtag for ECS210, J noted:

There were times when it was almost 100 percent a performance. I knew there were things I wanted to say, but I wouldn't have brought them up unless I'd been
asked to. And I sort of knew I wasn't being officially evaluated on it, but it was part of our participation. People were looking to see if I was participating. So I did.

When I asked Josh about tweeting as part of class, he told me that “probably about a third of it” was a performance. Samantha, too, noted, “I feel like part of [my participation] is definitely making a show. That's got to be part of it.” Brooklyn, meanwhile, had this to say about tweeting and blogging about anti-oppressive education as part of class:

I think some of it was how I actually felt, probably about 70 percent of it. Thirty percent was “I have to write this, and I have to try to please [the course instructors].” . . . It’s still a performance because you want to be viewed as that anti-oppressive teacher, but in the – I still don't know what the fuck I'm doing.

Ultimately, almost all of the participants acknowledged that, at least initially, they felt as though they were merely performing or “putting on.” J noted that even the role of “teacher” more generally continued to be a performance for them, saying, “Being a professional, being a teacher is at the moment sort of a skin I put on.” Rather than it feeling like a natural part of their identity, J told me, “It's still a performance I have to be very conscious of. And it doesn't happen naturally.”

What was striking, however, was how participants credited their performance of anti-oppressive educator with helping them to become more comfortable in that role. Samantha, for example, described the benefit of routinely performing this identity, saying “It's very repetitive [and] it's kind of a necessary repetitiveness.” J, too, noted that the continued performance of anti-oppressive educator was beneficial in solidifying that identity, noting that “more experience, I suppose, more practice” would be helpful in
continuing to develop that identity; Josh, meanwhile, told me, “If you don't perform, if you don't actually practice and you don't make mistakes along the way, you're not going to learn as well.” Similarly, Raquel noted, “I wanted to start tweeting probably . . . because, ‘Oh, we are supposed to be doing this, it’s a good thing to try this,’ but then, it’s like after doing it, I could see the benefits.” Later, she mused, “Maybe even roles that aren’t the . . . dominant [identities] can still become natural if you’re putting yourself into it repeatedly and really working at performing it.” Finally, Stephen put it like this:

It made me engage with those things enough that it became not a performance anymore. Like the alternative was not doing it, and then I wouldn't have had those thoughts. But now if – I've done that so much because I've had to, that it's automatically where my mind goes now. Why is this the way it is? All those big university ideas.

As well, for several participants, the act of performing anti-oppressive educator in public, online spaces was especially beneficial. Stephen, though admittedly not a huge fan of blogging, acknowledged that the online performance eventually led to a more concrete adoption of these ideas: “It leads to other things and it’s easy to get annoyed with it at first, because you’re like oh, I have to blog. Like, come on; but if you really engage with it and acknowledge that it goes somewhere.” He added:

I think part of the reason I started to take up what I did [anti-oppressive ed] was because the fact that it was online allowed me to see what other people were saying, so just having a conversation between the prof and I. So even if I wasn’t – even if a lot of us were spitting out the same thing it was put out there in different ways depending on the person. So I think just like the constant seeing it all the
time, and reading about it all the time online kind of nailed the point home with it, so I think that’s why. Because I saw other people doing the same thing and saying similar things made it more something I took up.

When I asked Kaylene about the impact of performing online, she noted that the public nature of the performance might push students to take up the identity more deeply; she speculated that, “It makes them feel like they have to live that, right?” suggesting that there was perhaps some social pressure to follow through. Notably, this idea that a public performance might lead to greater follow-through also aligns with research on voting patterns that suggests that making a public pledge to vote increases the likelihood of voting, as individuals wish to avoid the cognitive dissonance that would result from the mismatch of words and actions (Costa, Schaffner, & Prevost, 2018).

Of course, for some of the participants, the notion that their positions as anti-oppressive educators began as only a performance caused some tension and discomfort. Raquel, for example, noted “I’m trying not to let it [bother me], but yeah, a little bit. . . I don’t know, it’s kind of the feeling of, if you are really passionate about this stuff, why did it have to start as a performance? I don’t know.” Samantha, too, was troubled by this, saying, “This is troubling me. A lot. . . . Because I can’t figure it out. Now I'm trying to deconstruct my entire semester of what if I was – how much – the degree of my performance.”

As we considered the impact of performance, however, we also discussed whether performing the role of anti-oppressive educator online was worth something in itself, even if the intent did not yet feel entirely noble. For Josh, there was a definite potential benefit to others, at least; he noted:
I think there is a purpose in putting stuff out there because it's exposing Twitter followers and in some cases Facebook. . . . Sometimes just putting something out there, even if it's not really consequential, at least starts something. And then I can maybe be a little bit more useful [in making change] later on.

J, too, noted that the intent of the performance was not necessarily important. They noted:

Intent doesn’t always have any effect on the actual concrete outcome. So if you’re putting these theories and ideas into practice even if you haven’t internalized them yourself, the effect on the world is that they’ve been put into practice. Your internal environment doesn’t affect that.

However, J cautioned that while such a performance might help others, the potential for change within the self was limited unless there was some real intrinsic motivation linked to the performance, a genuine desire to take up the mantle of anti-oppressive educator:

I feel like if it’s coerced to [the] extent where the only reason people are doing it is because it’s mandatory, it’s very unlikely they’re ever going to follow through on that in real life. So they might perform it for the extent of however long it takes to get a grade, but once that immediate mode of stimulus of the grade is gone, or the degree has been achieved, they’re not going to follow through on it.

However, Stephen and Raquel expressed that in their cases at least, while there was certainly an aspect of performance, there was also a real desire to do the work of anti-oppressive education. Stephen, for instance, noted that when he blogged about anti-oppressive education,
I think even when . . . it was a performance, it wasn’t like I was denying myself by writing it or something. I really did agree with what it was at that point and I agree with it more now, but I don’t think I was lying or anything like that.

Raquel, too, noted that the underlying intent in her case was genuine, even when the performance was partly motivated by external factors:

It might be sort of a performance because, you know, when I tweet this, I know that whoever’s following this hashtag’s gonna see it so I’m thinking what they’re gonna think and stuff. But that doesn’t mean that I don’t believe what I’m tweeting. So it’s like, it’s real in that way because I am tweeting this because I support it.

Ultimately, then, it seems that there is real potential to be found in students’ performances of the role of anti-oppressive educator, particularly in public, online spaces. It seems possible that having students take up this role in open contexts might help them to both become more comfortable with and feel more inclined to take up that role in a more genuine way. As well, it seems reasonable to assume that others in online spaces might benefit from being exposed to the narratives of anti-oppressive education that might be spread through students’ performances. Along similar lines, there is something to be said for providing extrinsic motivation (i.e., grades) to encourage students to engage in the performance of anti-oppressive educators in online spaces, as this can provide an incentive for students who do already have the desire to take up this role to act upon that desire. As Raquel noted, “Knowing that if you try it, it’ll help your grades. . . it’s almost like you want to, and there’s a little extra incentive, so it kind of pushes people off that edge.”
7.4.2 Reimagining the Modernist Subject

For post-structural theorists, there is certainly potential power in performative acts, such as the act of performing the role of anti-oppressive educator online. That is to say,

In a post-structural understanding of the subject, while selfhood is necessarily bound by discourse and by the technologies of power, there is always the possibility of a degree of agency as subjects exercise self-care and, essentially, speak, think, and write themselves into being in particular ways (though still bound by the desire to be subjectified by certain discourses (Foucault, 1988).

(Hildebrandt & Couros, 2016, p. 95)

Of course, as I argued in Chapter 6, the participants’ desire to take up the discourse of the “good” teacher was in tension with their ability to take up the discourse of anti-oppressive educator, and this tension was exacerbated by the characteristics of online spaces (including, in particular, the perceived permanence of online spaces and identity). Consequently, it is worth considering the potential that might be offered by reimagining the fixed modernist notion of identity that remains prevalent in online spaces, as this perception of identity is in large part responsible for the aforementioned feeling of identity permanence. Arguably, a shift to a more post-structural notion of identity (as fluid and changeable) might allow pre-service teachers to feel less trepidation about posting potentially “controversial” content online, because that content would only be one part of a fluid “teacher self;” in other words, “rather than seeing each piece of online
identity as a permanent indicator of our thoughts and beliefs, we [could] allow for the possibility (and likelihood) of future change” (Hildebrandt & Couros, 2016, p. 95).

In a paper discussing the issue of fixed online identity as it pertains to academic scholarship, Hildebrandt and Couros (2016) noted the possibility inherent in such a shift in that context as well:

The movement away from an authentic self would allow academics’ online selves to be taken as an extension of their offline identities rather than as uncontextualized fragments. Indeed, this view of identity would release, to a degree, both our offline and our digital identities from the intense pressures of (self-)surveillance and judgment and allow us as a society to more easily move past particular digital (or analog) ‘misdeeds’ with the understanding that these need not be taken as permanent signs of our character (or lack thereof). Such a shift in understanding would have profound implications for academic freedom and for digital scholarship. (p. 96)

Perhaps, then, a societal shift in the understanding of digital identity (while obviously beyond the scope of this research) is an important goal for a number of reasons. For pre-service teachers, as I mentioned above, providing space and opportunity for learning about and unpacking the impacts of the various discourses that surround education is an important first step, but it seems likely that a more systemic shift in our understanding is needed, particularly as today’s young people grow up in a world that is over-saturated with digital recordings of their every move. As I pondered in a 2015 blog that seems more relevant than ever:
As digital worlds signal an end to forgetting, we must decide as a society how we will grapple with digital identities that are formed throughout the lifelong process of maturation and becoming. If we can no longer simply “forgive and forget,” how might we collectively develop a greater sense of digital empathy and understanding? (Hildebrandt & Couros, 2015, para. 13)

7.5 In Their Words: Where Do We Go from Here?

As I wrapped up my interviews with the research participants, I asked each of them the question, “Where do we go from here?” I offer some of their responses to provide a sense of the journeys that each participant took as part of the research. While some participants spoke directly to changes in their understandings of the intersection of social justice with online spaces, others noted how participation in the research had affected their relationship with the topic of anti-oppressive education more generally, by helping to cement its place in their minds.

7.5.1 J

For J, the enduring understandings that emerged from their participation in the research often related to their increased awareness of their performance of particular identities; these understandings helped to provide a focus going forward:

If I'm going to have an online teacher presence, the fact that I'm excluding these discussions – this engagement with these social things that are ongoing – it does send a message that it doesn't matter. That it's not part of who I am as a teacher. And it very much is. And I think [of] engaging in those discussions as a teacher, not just as a person – engaging in those things from the perspective of a teacher
will help me to internalize that I am – that I am a teacher, whatever that means. . .
I'm not just a person who puts on a hat. I'm a person who has the hat welded to
my head. I don't know. … Working to internalize that identity and become the
subject of the discourse – there is something – it's part of where I have to go from
here.

7.5.2 Stephen

For Steven, there was a recognition that online spaces did matter in terms of his
identity as an anti-oppressive educator. As well, while Stephen was initially concerned
about what future employers might think of him discussing “controversial” topics online,
he no longer viewed that as a reason to avoid digital spaces:

I think firstly, I have to break that barrier of I don't want it to be online because
I'm lazy or like – because it's an extra step for me right now. But I need to break
that barrier and make it the step or a crucial part of it I guess. . . . Which I don't
think is going to be that hard anymore after all these talks. And I don't want to
worry about any potential job prospects because of what I say, because I'm fairly
positive what I'm saying is correct so screw you, I don't want a job from you
anyway then, whatever school district or whoever. [Laughs] But, again, I don't
think that's going to be an issue just the way the world is moving.
7.5.3 Brooklyn

Brooklyn expressed an increased willingness to spend time taking part in events that focused on anti-oppressive education, noting that (given her very busy schedule) it was significant that these events were now a priority to her:

> It will all come to the teacher point, it's just do I want to take the long way or short way? I believe in education. So a lot more like attending [an event put on by her student group that focused on anti-oppressive education] on Thursday. I kind of have to, because I'm a member, but I want to, because I want to keep growing. . . . I think it was because it changed me so much, like learning about these things. I find things that change me – I always want to share with my students, so it hopefully also changes them. So I think that's where it really kind of hit me. . . . I only have so much time in a day. So if I can fit that in there, yeah. So it's pretty important to make it on my list of things to do.

She also noted that she was “getting there,” though perhaps not yet entirely comfortable, when it came to publicly taking up anti-oppressive issues in online spaces where she knew her family members might see them.

7.5.4 Josh

Josh acknowledged the importance of continuing the conversation around anti-oppressive education, and he pointed to online spaces as a good way to help him to engage with this topic as going forward:

> I think it's sort of a back of the mind kind of thing, especially having done these sessions. I think about [anti-oppressive education] a lot more and it makes me
think a lot more about the content that I learned in ECS210 now that we've had more of these conversations and since you push me in these conversations. Not like – you know what I mean, in a good way. Questioning and questioning. It's a work in progress. . . . It's something that I'm going to be aware of as I get into my teaching and really, I think, for me, I'm going to have to keep other conversations with the people who are more connected to teaching this kind of thought process. If I stay in contact with [professors]. If I stay in contact with my friend [who is interested in this area]. Maybe I'll tweet back and forth with you every once in a while. Then it's going to help me to be a lot more present and in that sort of mind frame. . . . I see your tweets. I see your class' tweets. I see [other professors’] tweets. I see all these types of things, so it keeps me at least a little bit engaged. So I think maybe going forward that's what I'll do. I'll just make sure that I stay in contact with the people who are a little bit more directly attached to it, and I won't lose all of that drive based on other varying interests.

7.5.5 Samantha

Samantha discussed her increased awareness of issues around anti-oppressive education and White privilege, and how this awareness affected her work in the area of social services. She also described how the awareness had brought her into a state of tension and frustration, and the realization that working towards being anti-oppressive necessitated the constant decision to do so:

It changes how I see things a lot, like, I’ve been in a period of “uncomfortability” ever since the semester ended, and it flares up and flares down quite rapidly. . . .
see [my job working in the area of social services] in a different light now. . . . For me it’s very problematic . . . I’m really careful with how I word everything around it and how I think about it. . . . It makes things frustrating, and it makes things troubling. . . . I’m faced with it all the time now because it’s inside of me now, and I’m constantly dealing with situations that bring up the “anti-oppressive-ness.” . . . I’m viewing things quite differently now, and I’m viewing White privilege quite differently now, and I’m unpacking it quite deeply, and it’s causing me to be frustrated. I’m in a state of “I don’t know.” I’m in a state of being between what I want to believe and what I do believe. . . . You have to choose what to believe . . . you have to try actively to be anti-oppressive at all times in order to succeed in that, so it’s a constant state of awareness.

As I mentioned above, after reviewing my analysis as part of the process of member checking, Samantha ultimately decided to use her real name in the research, writing this:

I’m wondering if it is too late to choose to own my identity and be named “Samantha” for the purposes of this dissertation. After reading the dialogue we shared so long ago, and grappling with this idea of being “right/correct” when voicing anti-oppressive commentary within a digital space, it seems counterintuitive to then hide behind a pseudonym as a sort of safety blanket.

To me, this response was an indication that Samantha had indeed internalized our conversations and that our discussions had created a lasting change in her mindset.

7.5.6 Kaylene

Of all of the participants, Kaylene demonstrated one of the most significant shifts in her thinking. At the outset of the research, Kaylene told me that she planned to
eventually delete some content on her blog in which she identified herself as bi-sexual, because she worried that this might prevent her from getting a job in certain Asian countries where she and her partner hoped to someday teach. In our final interview, she told me this:

I don't want my children to have that example [of being afraid to identify my sexuality online]. I want them to be able to be who they are. And why should I be ashamed that I am bisexual? I really shouldn't. It's a part of who I am. . . . I think, too, that it just feels like I'm not being as authentic of a Kaylene as I could be, if I'm completely shutting off that part. And that's a big thing for me, as being as authentic a human being, and – as you possibly can be.

Additionally, Kaylene had this to say about the gradual process of becoming an anti-oppressive educator:

I feel like quoting “Shrek,” [laughs] you know? It’s like an onion and you peel the layers back, right? I don’t know. I think it’s like an ongoing process. When you are truly dedicated to being anti-oppressive, then when you see the possibilities in your life to facilitate that then you can. . . . But . . . it’s tricky to be like that all the time.

7.5.7 Raquel

Raquel’s participation in my research was unique in that it ultimately led to a more academic engagement with the topic on her part. When I asked Raquel about her next steps, she expressed a desire to read and learn more about the journey towards anti-oppressive education, including a desire to engage with post-structural theorists as a way
to interrogate the possibilities of performativity. Ultimately, Raquel decided to identify herself publicly as a participant in my research, and we then applied and were accepted to present at the Discourse, Power, and Resistance conference in London, England. As part of our presentation, Raquel and I built a model for understanding how pre-service teachers could arrive at the point where they became subjects of the discourse of “anti-oppressive educator” and the role that online spaces played in this journey (see Appendix E). While the model is obviously a work in progress, it is evidence of the degree to which Raquel deeply engaged with the topic of my research and demonstrates the lasting impact that her participation has had.

7.6 Where Do I Go from Here?

While the purpose of this research was to examine pre-service teachers’ engagement with social justice-related topics in online spaces, I found that the process of carrying out the study had an impact on my own perceptions and practices as well. First, while I did engage with social justice issues online prior to conducting the research, I did so primarily via my blog and Twitter accounts. Prior to the research, I, like many of the participants, had ensured that my Facebook account was set to the maximum degree of privacy (this was in part a remnant of my time as a K-12 educator), and I shared relatively little on the site; I rarely posted articles or statuses related to social justice issues on that platform. As I engaged in conversations with participants about their presence in online spaces, however, I began to question my use of the Facebook platform and to wonder why I chose to engage with the site in the way that I did. Ultimately, I came to realize that, like the participants, I avoided potentially “controversial” topics due
to the presence of a number of Facebook “friends” with very different political beliefs; I was hesitant to post content that was likely to elicit disagreements or confrontations. Indeed, while there was certainly the potential for conflict when posting about social justice issues on my blog or Twitter accounts, I had constructed these spaces in such a way that the audience was primarily professional and generally aligned with my own ideologies. In essence, I had (to some degree) created a filter bubble or echo chamber for myself, in which I felt safe to engage with “controversial” topics. Thus, as a consequence of my research, I have now shifted my Facebook platform to be predominantly public, and I frequently use the space to post about social justice issues.

Additionally, engaging in this research caused me to examine my own participation in normative narratives around issues such as race and Whiteness, as well as other topics such as gender, class, and disability. As I worked with participants to unpack their use of particular words and phrases and their repetition of particular discourses, I became more aware of my own language. In particular, my conversations with Josh about his perceptions of racism on the west coast of Canada versus on the prairies led me to re-examine my own internal narratives surrounding the supposed tolerance and diversity in my home province of Ontario in contrast to my experiences in a prairie province.

Finally, I found that I was able to apply my findings related to course-based supports to my own practice. For instance, I work intentionally to build and maintain a sense of community in my classes in order to support students as they engage in uncomfortable conversations, a practice that has become even more important as we have transitioned to remote teaching and learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I am also explicit in telling students in my courses about the rationale for various elements of the
course design, including the purpose behind assignments and activities that require students to perform the role of anti-oppressive educator both on and offline. Where appropriate, I have also shared my research findings with colleagues (including at various conferences) in order to promote the various strategies for supporting students as they engage with social justice issues in digital spaces.

7.7 Limitations of the Research

As I mentioned a few times above, qualitative research is incompatible with positivist measures of quality such as validity; instead, Denzin (1997) argues that in the midst of crises of representation and legitimation, we must underscore the importance of “subjectivity, emotionality, feeling, and other antifoundational criteria” (p. 9). Indeed, in an era of critical post-structuralism, there is a need to introduce an entirely new set of criteria for legitimation. For instance, Denzin (1997) argues that the text should aim towards verisimilitude, that is, the ability to simulate the real, while simultaneously questioning whose verisimilitude is presented. Denzin (1997) further cautions that there must be a “recurring commitment to strip any text of its external claims to authority. Every text must be taken on its own terms” (p. 9). Along similar lines, Butler-Kisber (2010) offers six key issues that qualitative researchers must account for when designing and carrying out research: validity (which she reimagines as trustworthiness), generalizability (which she refers to as particularizability), access and consent, reflexivity, voice, and transparency.

Whenever possible, I have kept these issues in mind throughout the design and execution of my research. Of Butler-Kisber’s six areas of concern, I would
propose that the issues of validity/trustworthiness, access/consent, reflexivity, voice, and transparency have been addressed appropriately in the chapters above, in the sections on, respectively, research design/data collection (Chapters 2 and 4), participant selection (Section 4.2), my own positioning in the research (Section 1.3), ethical issues surrounding voice (Section 4.1.4), and data analysis (Section 4.4). However, I recognize that there is more to say on the limitations resulting from generalizability.

As I noted above, generalization is not necessarily a goal of qualitative research. However, Butler-Kisber (2010) suggests that an alternative might be the term particularizability, which she defines as "how a certain study resonates (Conle, 1996) with people in other situations so that they are able to find both confirmation and/or new understandings of experiences and phenomena" (p. 15). In the case of my research, the themes and other results described above, while not directly transferable to other situations, may still offer a better understanding of the topics studied; Tsing (2005) notes that "to study a particular instance offers a window into the universal. The local unfolds into the global and the universal; our devotions must simultaneously know the local and its transcendence" (p. 97). In addition, it is important to develop a richer understanding of how post-structural conceptions of subjectivity and discourse layer over these complexities of learning and reflecting in digital spaces, in order to provide a foundation for challenging and disrupting dominant discourses in education that serve to oppress and limit segments of the population. Indeed, reaching a more enriched, complex understanding of pre-service teachers' experiences with taking up social justice issues in online spaces may allow
us to better engage the transformative possibilities of digital technologies to create spaces that disrupt our commonsense and oppressive understandings rather than reinscribing them. Additionally, such an understanding might suggest avenues for supporting pre-service teachers as they engage with anti-oppressive education in face-to-face contexts.

At the same time, I recognize that there are a number of factors related to context that may limit the applicability of my findings. First, it’s important to acknowledge that the physical setting of my research is (like all qualitative settings) unique. The research is embedded in the context of urban Saskatchewan, which carries with it particularly charged political and societal narratives about certain social justice related issues, such as race and sexuality. This is further complicated by the fact that some of the participants came from rural Saskatchewan, adding in another layer of discourses to contend with. Thus, for instance, participants’ understandings of anti-Indigenous racism are quite specific to this place, and pre-service teachers in another context would likely have different interpretations of what constitutes “controversial” discussion on the subject of race; this is evident in Brooklyn’s desire to avoid speaking about Whiteness and race in online spaces that might be seen by those from her hometown, where there is a great deal of racist, anti-Indigenous sentiment.

The institutional context is also important to consider. That my research is situated within a faculty of education that includes social justice in its central mission has obviously influenced my results; indeed, undertaking such a project in an institutional setting that lacks this focus would be impossible, as the research is
predicated on the understanding that students are asked to engage with social
general issues online as part of their program of study. As well, we should consider
the demographics of this particular faculty of education, which has a high
concentration of White (and typically female) students, and the fact that the
participants were drawn from this pool; the research would have yielded vastly
different outcomes had the student population been largely made up of Indigenous
or Black students. Thus, while the findings of my research might resonate with those
in particular geographic or institutional settings, this audience is certainly limited.

It is also important to consider the temporal context of the research. While
the data was collected over five years ago, it is not the length of time that has passed
that is significant, but rather what has happened in the intervening years.
Specifically, though the context of this research is Canadian, we have not escaped
the rippling effects of Donald Trump’s election in 2016; in many ways, the Internet
(which knows no borders) has changed since that event, and thus it is likely that,
were I to carry out this research today, the results would be affected by shifts in the
social media climate. For example, the post-election Web appears to be more racist
than it was previously, thanks in part to Trump’s failure to condemn once-fringe
groups such as Neo-Nazis and White supremacists (Timber & Harwell, 2018).
Indeed, Trump himself has a long record of sharing racist content on social media -
in June of 2020, Twitter users discovered that the platform’s algorithm
recommended Trump’s account when the search term “racist” was entered (Perrett,
2020) - and this seems to have normalized the sharing of this type of subject matter
online. (It will be interesting to see the longer-term effects of Trump’s — and
QAnon’s — banishment from both Facebook and Twitter in the aftermath of the January 6, 2021 storming of the U.S. Capitol). At the same time, movements such as #BlackLivesMatter have brought racial issues to the forefront in our society, and thus anti-racist content is also on the rise on social media platforms (Chatterjee, 2020). Against this backdrop, the issue of pre-service teachers addressing social justice matters in online spaces is admittedly more complex than it was prior to the 2016 American presidential election.

Clearly, then, the generalizability/particularizability of this research is deeply influenced by both the geographical and temporal contexts in which it was carried out. This is not to say that the results cannot be useful in other contexts, but simply that we must consider the situatedness of the research carefully when making sense of the results.

7.8 Final Thoughts

As I combed through my transcripts, I came across multiple discussions of Eric Garner’s death and the subsequent protests: Eric Garner, a Black man who died after a police officer put him in a chokehold and continued to choke him, despite Garner saying “I can’t breathe” repeatedly. I write this today, five and a half years later, amidst the third week of protests that were set off by the death of George Floyd, a Black man who died after a police officer knelt on his neck for eight minutes and forty-six seconds, despite Floyd saying “I can’t breathe” repeatedly. In some ways, nothing has changed. But in others, it has.
After Floyd’s death, protests began both across the United States and around the world. In many ways, these protests have been very similar to the ones that followed the killing (and failure to indict the police officer responsible) of Eric Garner in Staten Island in 2014, or the killing (and failure to indict the police officer responsible) of Michael Brown in Ferguson in 2014, or the killing (and failure to convict the police officers responsible), of Freddie Gray in Baltimore in 2015: the same protest signs reading “Black Lives Matter” and “I can’t breathe,” the same calls for justice, for the dismantling of systemic racism, for an end to police brutality. But something is changed, too: the protests, sparked in a world already gripped in the midst of a global pandemic, seem to have reached a fever pitch, a sense of urgency that feels somehow different. We have already seen real change brought about by the protests: all four officers involved in Floyd’s death have now been arrested and charged; districts have banned the use of choke holds; police forces across the country are initiating reforms and re-examining use-of-force guidelines; and the words “Black Lives Matter” are painted in enormous letters on a road that leads straight to the White House. White people, too, seem to be taking notice of systemic racism in larger numbers than ever before. Mazumder (2020) notes:

Using Google Trends data comparing Google search behavior prior to and after May 25 — the day Floyd was killed — it does seem as if more individuals are interrogating racism in their own lives, with searches like “am I racist” nearly tripling. Phrases like “abolish police,” “defund police” and “police abolition” — concepts that have been central to the Black Lives Matter movement but less mainstream when discussing police reform — have also seen sharp upticks in interest.
And on social media, we are witnessing a reckoning like never before. Starbucks, shamed after a company policy preventing employees from wearing anything in support of Black Lives Matter, reversed course literally overnight (Murphy, 2020).

And finally - finally - the push for social justice and anti-racist has reached the mainstream education Twitterverse in a real way. So-called (White) edu-celebrities are being publicly called out by other White educators on their silence (or worse, tone-deaf continuation of sharing their typical safe, apolitical lists of the newest tech tools) in this time of social upheaval. Where five years ago I received strong pushback from other educators after I blogged about the need for teachers to speak up about social justice issues online (Hildebrandt, 2015), there is now what feels like a critical mass pushing in that direction.

Thus, five and a half years later, the central issue of this research - understanding how pre-service teachers engage with social justice and other “controversial” content online - seems more urgent than ever before. As we prepare our students to enter a world in which conversations around social justice issues such as racism are increasingly ubiquitous, it is critical that we equip these future teachers with the strategies and understandings necessary for them to engage with these intensely important issues in both the face-to-face and digital realms. Simultaneously, in our increasingly digital society, any attempt to produce graduates that strive to embody the role of “anti-oppressive educator” must include attention to how they might enact that role in digital spaces.

In this study, I set out to interrogate the ways in which pre-service teachers understood the process of engaging with social justice issues in public, online spaces. As part of this interrogation, I considered the ways in which dominant discourses contributed
to perceived barriers to this engagement, and I sought out strategies and supports that might help these pre-service teachers to act as anti-oppressive educators in online spaces. While the outcomes of this research are limited by context as well as other factors, I hope that they might provide some new insight into the subject matter and might prove useful as we go forward.
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Appendix A

Recruitment email/Talking points for class visit to ECS210 for Interviews

Dear former ECS210 students,
As part of my PhD research, I am looking for students to take part in interviews on the subject of digital identity and anti-oppressive education:
· As a participant, you will take part in between 3 and 5 hour-long interviews. The number of interviews will depend on how much time it takes to explore the ideas of digital identity and anti-oppressive education and to discuss and unpack your own online presence – this will be decided jointly with the researcher. During the interviews, you will be asked questions about the development of your digital identity, as well as questions around the public sharing of reflections on difficult knowledge and controversial issues and questions about your thoughts on having a digital identity as a pre-service teacher.
· As part of the research, we may also analyze existing pieces of your digital identity.
· This research has a critical lens; that is, I hope that these conversations will help you on your journey to becoming an anti-oppressive educator by helping identify ways that our contributions to online spaces can be problematic or harmful.
· The interviews will take place at a location agreed upon by the participant and the researcher.
· To participate, you should have some sort of active digital identity (i.e. blogging (independently or as part of a class), on Twitter, etc.)
  ● The interviews will be audio-recorded.
  ● You will receive a 20 dollar Tim Horton’s gift certificate for each interview session that you participate in, as compensation for your time.

If you are interested in participating in my research or would like to know more, please email me at katia.hildebrandt@uregina.ca. I will contact you via email to set up a quick preliminary phone conversation to determine if you’d be a good fit for the study (and vice versa).

I value your opinions and input, and I really hope that you’ll consider taking part in my research!

Thanks,
Katia Hildebrandt
Appendix B

Participant consent form

Project Title: Digital selves, subjectivity, and troubling knowledge: A post-critical ethnography of online identity and anti-oppressive education

Researcher:
- Katia Hildebrandt, PhD student in Curriculum and Instruction, Faculty of Education, University of Regina, 306-337-8862, katia.hildebrandt@uregina.ca
  (Supervisor: Dr. Patrick Lewis, Patrick.lewis@uregina.ca)

Purpose(s) and Objective(s) of the Research:
- This study will explore issues related to digital identity formation in pre-service teachers as they investigate topics related to race, white privilege, and other troubling knowledge. It examines student experiences in ECS210: Curriculum as Cultural and Social Practice, a mandatory course in the teacher education program at the University of Regina.
- The study will examine student perceptions of networked learning in general, of the process of building their digital identities through the use of tools such as blogs and Twitter, and of the process of documenting and reflecting on understanding of course material, much of which constitutes “troubling knowledge,” that is, knowledge that causes discomfort, disrupts commonsense ways of viewing the world, and problematizes dominant narratives.
- The research seeks to explore the complexities of networked learning in order to examine the process of digital identity formation for future educators as well as the possibility and/or desirability of constructing an "authentic" digital self for pre-service teachers. As institutions of higher education increasingly incorporate blended and online components into their courses, and as technology becomes increasingly pervasive as a mediator of our social and professional interactions, it is important that we recognize and understand the ways in which these issues are perceived by students and affect the ways in which they learn, communicate, and collaborate.

Procedures:
- As a participant in the study, you will take part in a series of interviews (between 3 and 5 interviews, depending on how much time it takes to explore the ideas of digital identity and anti-oppressive education and to discuss and unpack your own online presence – the number of interviews will be decided jointly with the researcher) with the researcher in the study. During the interviews, you will be asked questions about the development of your digital identity during the time of the course, as well as questions around the public sharing of reflections on difficult knowledge and controversial issues and questions about the possibility and desirability of creating an a digital identity as a pre-service teacher.
- You may also wish to discuss, and present for analysis, your Twitter or blog posts related to the class.
• The interview will take place at a location agreed upon by the participant and the researcher.
• Each interview will last about 60 minutes and will be audio-recorded.
• Please feel free to ask any questions regarding the procedures and goals of the study or your role.
• Please note that your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and will have no impact (either positive or negative) on your standing in any future classes you may take with the researcher or her supervisor.

Potential Risks:
• Given the sensitive nature of some of the topics discussed in the interview, there is a slight risk that you will feel some anxiety or discomfort during the interview. If you do not wish to continue, you may let the researcher know and the interview will be stopped immediately. If you feel emotional distress, you may wish to contact the University of Regina Counselling Services at 306-585-4491.
• If you choose to identity yourself through the inclusion of posts or tweets, there is the possibility of social repercussions from future employers who may be able to search for these items and connect them to you.

Compensation:
• As compensation for participating in this study, you will receive a 20 dollar Tim Hortons gift card for each interview that you take part in. You will receive this even if you choose to withdraw from the study.

Confidentiality:
• Your responses to interview questions will be confidential: No one other than the researcher will know that you have participated. Only the researcher and her supervisor will have access to your responses. However, given that participants come from a limited pool (ECS210 students from Winter 2014 and Fall 2014), there are some limits to confidentiality due to context. That is, it is possible that people may be able to guess that you have participated based on your enrollment in this class.
• If you choose to share your responses from Twitter or your blog during the interview, it is possible that someone could search for your blog/Twitter feed and learn that you participated in the research. Sharing these posts is voluntary – the choice is entirely up to you.
• Once your interview is complete, your name will be removed from your responses for the purpose of data storage.

Storage of Data:
• Your responses will be stored, with your name removed, for a period of 6 years. This data will be stored in a password protected file, on a password protected computer, in a locked office at the University of Regina. Only the researcher and her supervisor will have access to the data.
• After a period of 6 years, the data will be destroyed according to the University policy in place at that time.
Right to Withdraw:
- Your participation is voluntary and you can answer only those questions that you are comfortable with. You may withdraw from the research project for any reason, at any time without explanation or penalty of any sort.
- Should you wish to withdraw, please let the researcher know.
- Your right to withdraw data from the study will apply until one week after your final interview. After this time, it will no longer be possible to remove your data from the data pool.

Follow up:
- To obtain results from the study, please provide the researcher with your email address at the end of interview and inform him/her of your wish to be informed of the results.

Questions or Concerns:
- If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the researcher using the information at the top of page 1.
- This project has been approved on ethical grounds by the UofR Research Ethics Board on __________. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to the committee at (585-4775 or research.ethics@uregina.ca). Out of town participants may call collect.

Consent:

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the description provided; I have had an opportunity to ask questions and my/our questions have been answered. I consent to participate in the research project. A copy of this Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

______________________________      _______________________
Name of Participant                     Signature                      Date

______________________________                     _______________________
Researcher’s Signature                      Date

A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.
Appendix C

Rough overview of questions for Interview #1

What pseudonym would you like me to use for you?

Tell me about yourself:
  ● How old are you?
  ● What program are you in?
  ● What is your hometown? Describe it for me (population, demographics, etc.).
  ● Where did you go to elementary and secondary school? What were the demographics at these schools? ^

Tell me about your family:
  ● Who are your parents? What is their story? What do they do for a living?
  ● Where are your ancestors from?
  ● Who are the other members of your family? Siblings?

Tell me about your childhood, specifically:
  ● What are your early memories of technology? Of technology in school?
  ● What are your early memories of racism? When did you first become aware of your own race?
  ● What are your early memories of school? What kind of student were you?

Tell me about your post-secondary experience:
  ● When did you enter a BEd program? Why did you choose this program? Has your original motivation changed?
  ● Why did you/do you want to become a teacher?
  ● What makes a good teacher to you?
  ● What has your experience in the program been like?
  ● What does anti-oppressive education mean to you?
Appendix D

Research Ethics Board
Certificate of Approval

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR
Katia Hildebrandt

DEPARTMENT
Education

REB#
2014-185

SUPERVISOR
Dr. Patrick Lewis – Education

FUNDER(S)
Unfunded

TITLE
Digital Selves, Subjectivity, and Troubling Knowledge: A Post-Critical Ethnography of Online Identity and Anti-Oppressive Education

APPROVAL OF
Application for Behavioural Ethics Review
Initial Recruitment E-mail
Recruitment e-mail/Talking points for class visit to ECS210 for Interviews
Participant Consent Form
Survey Questions

APPROVED ON
October 28, 2014

RENEWAL DATE
October 28, 2015

CERTIFICATION
The University of Regina Research Ethics Board has reviewed the above-named research project. The proposal was found to be acceptable on ethical grounds. The principal investigator has the responsibility for any other administrative or regulatory approvals that may pertain to this research project, and for ensuring that the authorized research is carried out according to the conditions outlined in the original protocol submitted for ethics review. This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above time period provided there is no change in experimental protocol, consent process or documents.

Any significant changes to your proposed method, or your consent and recruitment procedures should be reported to the Chair for Research Ethics Board consideration in advance of its implementation.

ONGOING REVIEW REQUIREMENTS
In order to receive annual renewal, a status report must be submitted to the REB Chair for Board consideration within one month of the current expiry date each year the study remains open, and upon study completion. Please refer to the following website for further instructions: http://www.uregina.ca/research/REB/main.shtml

Dr. Larena Hoeber, Chair
University of Regina
Research Ethics Board

Please send all correspondence to:
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University of Regina
Research and Innovation Centre 109
Regina, SK S4S 0A2
Telephone: (306) 585-4775  Fax: (306) 585-4893  research.ethics@uregina.ca
Appendix E