





The Use of Social Media and Popular Culture to Advance Cross-Cultural Understanding

El uso de las redes sociales y la cultura popular para una mejor comprensión intercultural

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ABSTRACT

Although we live in a global society, educators face many challenges in finding meaningful ways to connect students to people of other cultures. This paper offers a case study of a collaboration between teachers in the US and Turkey, where 7th grade students interacted with each other via online social media as a means to promote cultural understanding. In a close analysis of a single learning activity, we found that children had opportunities to share ideas informally through social media, using their digital voices to share meaning using online writing, posting of images and hyperlinks. This study found that students valued the opportunity to develop relationships with each other and generally engaged in sharing their common interests in Hollywood movies, actors, celebrities, videogames and television shows. However, not all teachers valued the use of popular culture as a means to find common ground. Indeed, teachers had widely differing perspectives of the value of this activity. Through informal communication about popular culture in a «Getting to Know You» activity, students themselves discovered that their common ground knowledge tended to be US-centric, as American students lacked access to Turkish popular culture. However, the learning activity enabled students themselves to recognize asymmetrical power dynamics that exist in global media culture.

RESUMEN

Si bien vivimos en una sociedad global, los educadores se enfrentan a numerosos desafíos a la hora de hallar formas significativas de conectar a los alumnos con gente de otras culturas. Este artículo muestra un caso práctico de colaboración entre profesores de los Estados Unidos y Turquía, en el que alumnos de séptimo grado interactuaron entre sí a través de las redes sociales con el fin de promover la comprensión cultural. Al analizar una única actividad de aprendizaje hallamos que los alumnos tenían la oportunidad de compartir ideas informalmente a través de las redes sociales, usando su voz digital para compartir significados mediante la escritura online, publicación de imágenes e hipervínculos. Este estudio halló que los alumnos valoraban la oportunidad de relacionarse entre sí y tendían a compartir su interés común en películas de Hollywood, actores, famosos, videojuegos y programas de televisión. Sin embargo, no todos los profesores valoraban el uso de la cultura popular como medio para la búsqueda de puntos en común. En efecto, los profesores tenían perspectivas muy distintas sobre el valor de esta actividad. Mediante la comunicación informal en torno a la cultura popular en una actividad de conocimiento mutuo, los propios alumnos descubrieron que sus conocimientos en común tendían a estar centrados en los Estados Unidos, en tanto en cuanto los alumnos estadounidenses no tenían acceso a la cultura popular turca. Sin embargo, la actividad de aprendizaje permitió a los propios alumnos reconocer las dinámicas de poder asimétrico que existen en la cultura mediática global.

KEYWORDS | PALABRAS CLAVE

Digital media, social media, global, alfabetización, Educación Secundaria, cultura popular, intercultural.
Media digitales, medios sociales, global, literacy, Middle School, popular culture, cross-cultural.



1. Introduction

Undoubtedly, Web 2.0 technologies enable learners to travel across time and space. In the past two decades, all around the world, most general accounts of education have emphasized that schooling needs to take account of the multiple channels of communication and media now in popular use (Lee, Lau, Carbo, & Gendina, 2012; New London Group, 1996). In the context of English language arts education, in particular, the traditional print-based concepts of literacy, text, and meaning are becoming strategically displaced as teachers and school leaders begin to recognize that people now use language, images, sound, and multimedia for everyday purposes of expression and communication and that the relevant associated competencies must be part of elementary and secondary education (Hobbs, 2010; Tuzel, 2013a; Tuzel, 2013b). Undoubtedly, literacy today is “situationally specific” and “dynamically changing” (Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, & Leu, 2008: 5) all around the world. In Turkey, for example, there has been a significant investment in providing access to digital technology in elementary and secondary schools to support teaching and learning (Unal & Ozturk, 2012).

In this paper, we present a case study of an international collaboration involving middle school teachers from two countries, working in collaboration with the authors to design and implement an intercultural learning experience that brings together Turkish and American students in Grade 7 using digital and social media. The goal of the initiative was designed to help students (a) develop confidence in expressing themselves with people using online social media, (b) promote cultural knowledge and critical thinking about media and popular culture, and (c) advance global understanding between middle-school students in Turkey and the United States. By linking together subject-area instruction in social studies and foreign language education in English, this initiative explored how to use the power of social media for sustained social and cultural interaction over a period of six weeks. Evidence from this case study demonstrates that the use of digital and social media to activate children’s voice requires sensitivity to differential perceptions of the value of popular culture among teachers as well as robust appreciation of the asymmetries and inequalities still inherent in global information and entertainment flows.

1.1. Cross cultural learning goes digital

Globalization and digital technology have combined to open up cultures to a fast-paced world of change and educators have been inspired to bring the world into their classrooms, enabling students to have a civic voice (Hobbs, 2010; Stornaiuolo, DiZio, & Helming, 2013). Although traditional global pen pal programs have been in place in the USA since the 1920s (Hill, 2012), in the years after the 9/11 terrorist attack, some educators began exploring with how to promote student voice and global understanding to bring together Americans and peoples of the Middle East through cross-cultural communication learning experiences. To increase students’ experiences with people different from themselves, such projects may include work with international students from local universities, immigrant organizations in the community, service learning projects, exchanges through e-mail or videos, and taking students overseas (Merryfield, 2002). In these projects, teachers may ask students to use email or online communication to develop keyboard skills, share poetry, report writing, and journal writing – all fundamental dimensions of literacy education.

The rise of social media has made it easier for teachers and students from diverse cultures to meet and work together. Teachers may emphasize cross-cultural learning experiences as a transformative way to teach “children to care and make a difference in the world while simultaneously trying to make a difference in the world” (Aldridge & Goldman, 2007: 78). Such efforts can be useful not only to students, but to teachers as well. Cross-cultural projects may not only promote confidence in self-expression, but may also promote the development of reflective-synthetic knowledge, a concept articulated by Kincheloe (2004) who described it as a process that advances student voice while revealing to both teachers and students the often hidden assumptions about the nature of knowledge itself.

1.2. Media and digital literacy for global education

The term digital literacy has begun to emerge to reflect the broad constellation of practices that are needed to thrive online (Rheingold 2012; Gilster, 1999). Most conceptualizations focus on the pragmatic skills associated with the use of digital tools and texts. As Greenhow, Robelia and Hughes (2011: 250) note, “Digital literacy includes knowing how and when to use which technologies and knowing which forms and functions are most appropriate for one’s purposes”. But other definitions explicitly conceptualize digital literacy as a broader literacy competency, building on the tradition of media literacy and including the ability of learners to access, analyze, create, reflect and

take action using the power of communication and information to make a difference in the world (Hobbs, 2010).

Even more broadly, across Europe, Asia, South America and Africa, the term media and information literacy (MIL) has been recognized as a means to foster more equitable access to information and knowledge; promote freedom of expression; advance independent and pluralistic media systems; and improve the quality of education. By empowering “citizens to understand the functions of media and other information providers, to critically evaluate their content, and to make informed decisions as users and producer of information and media content”, media and information literacy, while sometimes seen as separate and distinct fields, are conceptualized as a combined set of competencies necessary for life and work today (UNESCO, 2013: 16).

Only a few school-based projects have aimed to advance learner voice by connecting young people from across communities to promote cultural understanding through media literacy. For example, elementary educators in the USA used a variety of media lite-

eracy practices, including viewing and discussion, critical analysis of images, film/media production and interaction with young people from Kuwait as a way for children to gain knowledge of the people and culture of the region (Hobbs & al., 2011a; Hobbs & al., 2011b). By talking about how news, media and popular culture embed stereotypes about culture and values, children as young as eight and nine were able to recog-

nize that media messages (including photographs, movies, websites and books) can be critically interrogated. Media analysis and production activities can help build critical thinking and activate student voice while simultaneously advancing knowledge and language skill development (Hobbs, 2007; Tuzel, 2012a; Tuzel, 2012b). For example, during the process of an action research project, a Turkish teacher who used media literacy education activities in language arts, using popular culture texts (film, TV serial, magazine etc.) for learning, found increases in students’ levels of media literacy, critical thinking and language skills; in addition to expanding textual awareness, this learning activity shifted learners’ conceptualization of literacy from the alphabetic to the multimodal (Tuzel, 2012a).

Social media and other virtual environments have the potential to play a role in terms of cultivating intellectual curiosity and advancing civic voice in conjunction with learning about people and cultures around the world. Intergroup dialogue (generally involving young adults) has been shown to be effective in combating negative stereotypes and prejudices about countries and cultures, promoting tolerance and intercultural acceptance (Hurtado, 2005) and a growing number of organizations are bringing global dialogues to college students using digital media (Soliya, 2014). However, historical asymmetries of status and power between groups may affect the quality of learning for the majority/empowered and minority/disempowered group members (Cikara, Bruneau, & Saxe, 2011).

Accordingly, based on this review of the literature, we report the results of a single school-based instructional activity that aimed to activate student voice and promote global awareness. In exploratory research, we examine these research questions: How did US and Turkish learners and teachers experience the cross-cultural communication project? What were the affordances and limitations of using a social media exchange activity for activating student voice and building cross-cultural understanding?

2. Methods

This section briefly summarizes the case study method we employed to explore the use of a private online social network to facilitate co-learning between middle-school teachers and students in the United States and Turkey. The project was designed to enable American and Turkish students to (a) develop confidence in expressing themselves

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with people using online social media, (b) promote cultural knowledge and critical thinking about media and popular culture, and (c) advance global cultural understanding between middle-school students in Turkey and the United States. By linking together subject-area instruction in social studies and foreign language education in English, this initiative helped both teachers and learners explore how to use the power of an online social network for sustained social and cultural interaction.

A six-week online cross-cultural learning experience program using a private online social network was developed and implemented by researchers in collaboration with The George School faculty (a pseudonym for a private school in Northern California) and the faculty of The Blossom School (a pseudonym for a private school in Western Turkey). Close analysis of one lesson provided us with an opportunity to gather exploratory data about the way teachers and students perceive the value of using one's voice to encounter people from another culture and learn about their lives, experiences and interests.

A total of 84 children between the ages of 12 and 14 participated in the project. A middle-school history teacher at George School and his 43 Grade 7 students worked with five English teachers at Blossom School in Turkey, along with two M.A. students in Education, and 41 Grade 7 Turkish students enrolled in an English class.

2.1. Research process

In this study, interviews, documents, observations, video recordings and students' work samples were used to analyze the quality of the learning experience. The researchers conducted interviews with both teachers and students before, during and after the implementation to record the thoughts and opinions of the teachers and students. The researchers paid special attention to changes in students' comments about the other culture. The authors also focused on the reasons for the posts and interactions of the students. Therefore, the authors tried to make an extensive analysis of the causes of events and situations (Ellet, 2007:19). Data triangulation provides support for reliability as different data collection tools including interviews, observation and written and visual document analysis in the social network were used. In both schools, students participated in the project and performed the tasks requested of them during the implementation on a voluntary basis.

2.2. Curriculum development

Using the model of a university-school partnership, Turkish and American middle-school teachers worked collaboratively with researchers to prepare four lesson plans based on the core principles of media literacy (NAMLE, 2008). University school partnerships provide important supports to educators who aim to explore innovative instructional practices in digital and media literacy education (Moore, 2013). The development of four lesson plans enabled students to share information about the culture and the values of their family and community, learn more about the history, cultural practices and social norms of these two cultures, and critically analyze popular entertainment media representations of culture and values. Table 1 provides a summary of the complete curriculum as aligned with elements from the five-part AACRA definition of digital and media literacy (Hobbs, 2010). Researchers

| Key elements of the curriculum | Media Literacy Dimensions (AACRA) |
|--|--|
| 1. Getting to know you | |
| Share three things about yourself and your culture in one week. The students can share a sentence, photo, video or any other thing they wanted to share. | Access, create. |
| 2. Create a short film about your culture and life | |
| Create and share a short video that describes aspects of your daily life. | Reflect, create. |
| 3. Critically analyze TV shows that feature students, teachers and schools | |
| Compare and contrast two video excerpts from USA and Turkish television that are set in high school and feature the representation of high school teachers and students. | Access, analyze, create, reflect. |
| 4. Discussion of Current Events | |
| Read and discuss a news magazine article about current events in the Ukraine. | Access, analyze, create, reflect. |

and teachers were careful to include a balance of learning experiences that encouraged students to access, analyze, create, and reflect on information and ideas in the context of the global co-learning experience. Before implementation of the curriculum, the researchers held four online planning meetings with both Turkish and American teachers where a timetable and learning process was established and the students were pre-registered in the social media platform.

3. Findings

In order to focus on how middle-school students developed confidence in expressing themselves using online social media by finding common ground with peers from halfway around the world, we describe and analyze the implementation of only the first lesson. In a close analysis the “Getting to Know You” learning activity, children had opportunities to share ideas informally through social media, using their digital voices to share meaning using online writing and posting of images. While students valued the opportunity to develop relationships with each other by sharing their common interests in Hollywood movies, actors, celebrities, videogames and television shows, teachers had widely differing perspectives of the value of this activity. Through informal communication about popular culture, students themselves discovered that their common ground knowledge tended to be US-centric, as American students lacked access to Turkish popular culture. The learning activity foregrounded the asymmetrical power dynamics that exist in global media culture where information and entertainment flows are primarily one-way in nature and perceptions about the value of popular culture are contested. As is appropriate with case study research, we interweave interpretation with narrative description.

3.1. Learning to talk across cultures

- Lesson 1, “Getting to Know You”, was an ice breaker activity, aimed to introduce students to each other and help them develop confidence in interacting with others as they gained familiarity with the Ning social media platform. Through this activity, students began to discover their similarities and differences. Teachers asked their students to share three things about themselves and their culture in one week; they did not limit students about the structure, length or content of their posts. The 84 participating Turkish and American students could share a sentence, photo, video or any other thing they wanted to share. In order to support students in the process of relationship formation, students were assigned to one of seven groups (with six students in each group). The small group structure made it easier for students to read and follow each other’s posts and respond to each other personally. Students shared 391 posts during the implementation of Lesson 1, for an average of 4.6 posts per student during the week. Some of these posts were questions designed to engage another student while others were just aimed at presenting themselves and their own culture.

Students demonstrated significant interest in participating in this activity. However, in the first few days, they sometimes had difficulty responding to questions or commenting on each other’s posts. Two main reasons seem evident: most importantly, Turkish students were expressing themselves in a foreign language while USA students were communicating in their native language. Also, the ten-hour time difference between The Blossom School and The George School made it initially difficult for students to understand how to follow each other’s comments. It took a few days for students to understand how to navigate and read the posts as Turkish and American students each posted comments at different times of the day (at school) and the evening (at home).

The novelty of “talking” across space and time was fascinating to many young students. Early on, a student from The George School noted:

- “USA Student 1: This is kind of a random comment, but I think that it is kind of mindblowing when you think about the fact that two people can be sitting at a computer, typing on the same forum, but for one person it is the early morning (it is 10:40 in the morning as I type this) and for the other it is late at night (I think it is 8:40 at night in Turkey)”.

Students enjoyed the opportunity to interact socially and share information about their own culture. In general, students preferred to write simple sentences. However, students also uploaded photos and videos of themselves, friends and family, favorite places and food. Some students shared links to music, movie series and computer games they loved, asked what their peers thought about them, or responded to similar questions. The researchers observed that the students visited their profiles and the discussion board many times during the week when Lesson 1 was being implemented. Student behavior reflects Stern’s (2008) observation about the authentic personal pleasure young adolescents experience using social media for self-presentation and peer validation.

Analysis of the 391 posts that students shared during this activity reveals a wide range of subjects. Some of these subjects are about ordinary elements of daily life, community and environment, favorite activities, school work, information about their parents and siblings and their relationships with them, countries they visited and favorite foods. The students were very open to interaction and curious about each other's lives. They wanted to inform the students with whom they were talking and elaborate on the subjects of their conversations. Notice the clear evidence of relationship development displayed in the exchange below: "USA Student 2: My brother is 16. How old is your brother? Turkish Student 1: My brother is 8 years old. He is younger than me. I've got dogs too. I've got 2 dogs. One of my dog [sic] have 3 puppy. They are very sweet I can share their photo maybe. What about your dogs? Can you share their photos?"

The activity clearly enabled students to build trust and respect and it may also have prevented students from approaching each other based on stereotypes, helping them to see each other as individuals. Within a day or two, the American students, who thought that they were interacting with Middle Eastern people, realized that the students with whom they were talking were individuals with families, personal lives and hobbies. They stopped seeing the students at the other school as a group of foreigners and started to see them as individuals. It was certainly the same for Turkish students, too, who may have had stereotypes about American culture.

3.2. Finding common ground through media and popular culture

More than two-thirds of all the social interactions during Lesson 1 focused on the discovery of common ground through shared interests in mass media and popular culture. Posts included information and opinions about American mass media, as students discussed a variety of actors, movies, TV series video games, popular books, music and similar subjects. In these dialogues, many students discovered that they were interested in the same types of popular culture products as the students in the other country. They were excited by the discovery of their common interests in music, fashion, gaming and movies.

Thanks to these dialogues, children realized that although they lived in different parts of the world, they admired the same singers and actors, watched the same movies and TV series and played the same computer games in their free time. They were excited to recognize that popular culture was a kind of common global culture. The informal quality of language and expression used on the social network, plus the amount of conversation about media and popular culture, was somewhat unnerving to Turkish teachers of English language who were unfamiliar with the pedagogy of media literacy education. To illustrate this point, consider this exchange between Turkish and American teens:

- Turkish Student 3: Do you know Mythbusters that show is really good.
- USA Student 4: OMG! That show is amazing!
- USA Student 6: Yeah I used to watch that show and want to try doing the things they did. It was a little dangerous though.
- Turkish Student 5: Yea, they blow up everything: D
- USA Student 3: Hahahahaha, Do you know the show "Top Gear"?
- Turkish Student 3: Yea, It's an American show, right?
- USA Student 3: It's actually from the UK but there is an American version and lots of other versions although the original one is from the UK
- USA Student 6: No, my parents won't let me :(

During this activity, students developed confidence in expressing their voice by sending posts, interacting and asking questions. While most used grammatically correct English, others used some of the linguistic conventions of text messaging, including emoticons and excessive punctuation in their informal writing. Students discovered that they had valuable knowledge that was of interest to others. In particular, American students were surprised to learn that Turkish students were familiar with their favorite TV shows, videogames, movies and music.

3.3. Conflicting values about popular culture among teachers

Teachers had differing perceptions about the value of Lesson 1, which encouraged children to use social media as an informal sharing opportunity to encounter each other as human beings. Mr. Herbert, from George School, was very happy that his students started to learn about the personal interests of children who were growing up in Turkey. He was pleased that students could activate their out-of-school knowledge about sports, media, music and family life in interacting with Turkish middle-school students through social media. Because students know so little

about daily life in Turkey, Mr. Herbert believed that his students were learning from their Turkish peers to “question the prejudices and stereotypes conveyed by the American mass media” about the people and cultures of the Middle East. At the end of the first week of the activity, he noticed students' attitude shifts during classroom discussion and he focused on the changes he observed in the prejudices of the students. He described how students started to question their knowledge about the Middle East and Turkey.

By contrast, teachers at the Blossom School in Turkey had a different perspective about the value of Lesson 1. Turkish teachers had hoped that the project would be an opportunity to promote Turkish culture and values. For this reason, they were unhappy that in Lesson 1, students were mostly discussing American popular culture. Teachers encouraged their students to talk about elements of the Turkish culture such as traditional Turkish coffee, carpets, food, geography, history and hospitality. Despite these admonitions, the Turkish students kept on posting comments about American mass media and pop culture. In an interview, Mr. Yaman expressed this concern, “In this project, we mainly wanted the students to promote their lifestyle and culture to the American students. I believe that they should focus on Turkish culture, but they mostly talked about American movies and celebrities”. One of the Turkish graduate students who helped the Turkish teachers with this project said, “I witnessed that teachers were uncomfortable with students' using social media and creating video, especially when such activity led to the production of popular culture texts that threatened national school-sanctioned curricula and the teachers' authority”.

These findings are aligned with work by Moore (2013) who reports various sources of anxiety among elementary and secondary teachers concerning the inclusion of popular culture in the classroom. Although informal learning in formal educational contexts can be highly valuable, this study illustrates that experiences with using one's voice in a social media network may “shape young people's knowledge construction in unexpected ways”, inspiring teachers to “structure informal practices that were not perceived to hold a legitimate place in formal education” (Greenhow & Lewin, 2015: 18).

In the context of this middle-school global learning experience, children had opportunities to share ideas through social media, using online writing, posting of images, and the creation of short films, posters and electronic comic books. We have shown that there is educational value in the informal use of social media with young adolescents, whose in-school use of social media in the context of social studies and foreign language education has not yet been researched widely. For young adolescents, it may be empowering to discover that people from far-off lands have families, pets, friends, and all the ordinary joys, trials and tribulations of growing up.

3.4. Discovering asymmetries in access to media and popular culture

Turkish students were both excited to discover their common interests and disappointed to see that the American students had such limited knowledge about Turkish culture and media. Some Turkish students asked their American peers about their familiarity with particular Turkish actors and musicians. Turkish children were curious if American students were familiar with the best and most famous Turkish movies and TV series. However, they did not get any responses. Because of the historical development, size and scale of the USA media industry, Americans have less access to global popular culture than people from other nations (Crothers, 2013). For example, only seven cities in the United States carry the television network Al Jazeera America (Cassara, 2014).

When the Turkish children were interviewed, many revealed their disappointment that the conversations about popular culture were a “one-way street” with an exclusive focus on American media from Hollywood and Silicon Valley. The asymmetry of knowledge about popular culture was at times frustrating to the Turkish students. For

example, one Turkish student said, "We know about the American TV series, movies and singers. Justin Bieber is very famous and handsome both for them and for us. But there are also singers in our country who are as handsome and talented as Justin Bieber, yet they do not know about them".

Over time, American children also grew more aware of the asymmetry problem, and by the end of the six-week curriculum, both groups had increased their awareness of how some asymmetries in their online relationship that were the result of structural, economic and political differences in the global media system. Mr. Herbert, the American teacher, was supportive of the children's discovery of the problem of asymmetrical access. According to the teacher, for some students, it was a shock to learn that, despite their privileged status as American school children enrolled in a private school, they missed having access to global information and entertainment coming from Turkey. It was an eye-opening experience that introduced children to the intersection of individual and institutional dynamics at work in relation to cultural imperialism (Schiller, 1969) where the pursuit of commercial interests by US-based transnational corporations undermined the cultural autonomy of countries around the world. At the end of the learning experience, one American student wrote, "I learned that the world outside of America is actually pretty similar to ours, and that different people view different things in very different ways. But I noticed that I have no idea about Turkish cultures and life. I learned a lot from this, and it was really great!".

Media globalization has created new kinds of inequalities between nations in relation to media production and global distribution that reflect wider political and economic problems of dependency (Boyd-Barrett, 1998). The rise of media globalization, which emerged at the beginning of the 20th century from the global export of Hollywood film, has now expanded to include music, video games, advertising, merchandising and celebrity culture. We did not expect to find that, as the use of a private online social network empowered student voice, it also enabled students to develop a deeper understanding of the global flows of entertainment and information that shape how cultural products are exchanged and experienced. We did not expect that young people would learn to use their digital voices in interacting with foreign peers by finding common ground in the pleasures of movies, television shows, videogames, and popular music. We did not expect for this practice to be controversial with classroom teachers. Through a close analysis of an activity where young teens interacted informally with each other to find common ground, this study is the first to demonstrate that, through interacting with global peers, even young teenagers can begin to recognize the nature of one-way information flows that are driven by the global media system where USA music, movies and videogames dominate.

4. Discussion and conclusions

The opportunity to talk across the limitations of time and space can be transformative. This paper has offered a case study of a collaboration between teachers in the US and Turkey, where 7th grade students interacted with each other informally via online social media as a means to activate student voice and promote cultural understanding. In the context of this middle-school global learning experience, children had opportunities to share ideas through social media, using online writing, posting of images, and the creation of short films, posters and electronic comic books. We have shown that there is educational value in the informal use of social media with young adolescents, whose in-school use of social media in the context of social studies and foreign language education has not yet been researched widely. For young adolescents, it may be empowering to discover that people from far-off lands have families, pets, friends, and all the ordinary joys, trials and tribulations of growing up. The opportunity to use social media for ordinary conversation –finding common ground– may have benefits that include but go far beyond the mastery of English grammar and usage.

Digital media are useful for crossing borders of all kinds. While students valued the opportunity to develop relationships with each other by sharing their common interests in Hollywood movies, actors, celebrities, videogames and television shows, teachers had widely differing perspectives of the value of this activity. While we anticipated that this project would enable us to explore how middle-school students navigate geographic and cultural borders, this research demonstrates that teacher attitudes about popular culture represent another key fault line that may either support, deepen or limit the value of digital literacy instructional practices, particularly when social media activities are used by students to engage in authentic cross-cultural dialogue. More research will be needed to fully understand the conditions under which students' use of social media to share informal knowledge may inadvertently become a kind of power wedge between students and adults.

This study has implications for the professional development of educators with interests in student voice. When students are able to freely express themselves, they will inevitably reveal their authentic and deeply-felt attachments

to mass media and popular culture. Teachers who may be ambivalent, conflicted or even hostile to popular culture in the classroom and professional development must address this issue in the context of digital learning. For this reason, Hagood, Alvermann and Heron-Hruby (2010) have suggested that teachers who participate in carefully designed long-term professional development programs should become comfortable in integrating popular culture texts into their curricula. According to Alvermann (2012: 218), “that such identity constructions frequently become visible through films, music, rap lyrics, and so on is yet another reason why popular culture texts have a place in a school’s curriculum and its classrooms”. Of course, there may be valid reasons for why some students may not wish to explore their identities through popular culture texts introduced in the school curriculum, especially if (however well intended), the classroom activities colonize or trivialize young people’s interests (Burn, Buckingham, Parry, & Powell, 2010).

But because educators have a love-hate relationship with mass media, popular culture and digital media, these attitudes inevitably come into play when digital technologies are used in education. We recognize the powerful opportunity that cross-cultural projects may play in promoting a reflective stance among teachers, who may discover the particularities of their values through collaborative projects like the one we describe in this paper. It may be that hidden assumptions about the nature of knowledge itself, including the sometimes rigid and hierarchical positioning of “high” and “low” culture, can be revealed through activities that enable students to bring their lived experience of popular culture and daily life into the classroom (Hobbs & Moore, 2013). In the design and development of instructional pedagogies that use social media to promote cross-cultural dialogue, teachers may benefit from structured opportunities to reflect on how their attitudes about mass media and popular culture may shape their curriculum choices and use of digital texts, tools and technologies.

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