Digging into YouTube Videos: Using Media Literacy and Participatory Culture to Promote Cross-Cultural Understanding

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Abstract

It has been said that Web 2.0 is changing the way students learn. The time of the teacher as the primary source of information is a relic of the past. The role of the educator, as a result of new media, has changed substantially from one that is focused on the one-way transfer of information to one that trains students how to participate in digital environments with intelligence, skill, and literacy. It is our contention that educators and learners can exploit this media to engage in cross-cultural exchange and ultimately greater cross-cultural understanding. This paper will elaborate on the ways in which teachers and students can use YouTube as a site for cultivating cross-cultural exchange and understanding by establishing video-pal relationships with other students from outside their home culture. Digital exchanges can help students and teachers build connections with their colleagues abroad and to develop an international perspective.

Keywords: YouTube, Cross-Cultural Education, Media Literacy, Web 2.0, Participatory Culture, Social Networking, Vlogging

Introduction

It has been said that Web 2.0 is changing the way students learn. The time of the teacher as the primary or only source of information is a relic of the past. We now live and learn in an era in which emerging media and the so-called "information revolution" are redefining education, socialization, and access to social and intellectual capital. Individual learners—whether they are affiliated with a formal educational institution or not—are less reliant on an institution that "pushes" information to the learner and more interested, and likely, to "pull" their own learning from multiple sources. The role of the educator, as a result of these new media, has changed substantially from one that is focused on the one-way transfer of information to one that trains students how to participate in this new environment with intelligence, skill, and literacy. Then, within this context and drawing upon Dewey's argument as quoted by Koliba (2004), "'education can and should only occur in the context of active relationships—as instances of communication with others. [Dewey] saw all communication as potentially educative in nature' and 'asserted that, in order for an experience, there must be an intentional effort to communicate the value of the experience to a person's learning'" (Koliba 2004, 297; quoted in Kimoto et al. 2009, 362).Therefore, education, to a large extent, concerns itself with the mind-ful cultivation of intentions to learn new skills, ways of thinking, and knowledge that will enable learners to actively and successfully participate in the environments in which they inhabit. New technologies and the emergence of Web 2.0 participatory culture have created a globally integrated virtual environment in which people conduct business, engage in social relationships, undertake various types of research and so on.

Web 2.0—which refers in general to a variety of social networking platforms and media for collaborative content development, such as blogs, wikis, YouTube (and similar websites for sharing digital video), Facebook, MySpace and so on—is commonly referred to as "participatory culture." Since "participatory culture shifts the focus of literacy from individual expression to community involvement" (Jenkins et al. 2009, xiii), it is our contention that educators and learners can exploit this media to engage in cross-cultural exchange and ultimately greater cross-cultural understanding. This paper will elaborate on the ways in which teachers and students can use YouTube as a site for cultivating cross-cultural exchange and understanding by establishing video-pal relationships with other students from outside their home culture. We will present examples and suggest practices that educators might consider adding to their pedagogical toolboxes and relate those practices to

the core principles of media literacy education outlined by the National Association of Media Literacy Education (NAMLE) in 2007.

This paper builds on findings put forward by several scholars (e.g. Alvermann 2008; Ching-Chiu and Polaniecki 2008), which illustrate that students who engage in the process of producing their own media become more savvy consumers of media and become proficient in working in shared spaces that are occupied by diverse populations of users. It is our contention that students from various cultures can forge 'video-pal' relationships in order to embark upon a common goal to further develop their respective media literacies and to broaden their worldviews as they share ideas, images, and perspectives with one another throughout the exchange. Students from around the world are already encountering one another in multiple social networking contexts; some benefit from these interactions while others, sadly, miss the opportunity to learn about the 'other' by failing to recognize that those they encounter may have different perspectives, worldviews, or cultural lenses through which they construe events and media representations of events. Teachers can draw upon this rich reservoir of social diversity present in online communities and guide students to consciously engage with others in cross-cultural exchanges with the dual intention of developing various media literacies and increasing students' understanding of other cultures.

We will begin by defining media literacy within the context of participatory culture and elaborating on the ways in which the practices we propose are related to those literacies. Then we will provide examples of the ways in which YouTube can be used as an educational tool, particularly for cross-cultural exchange and understanding. To this end, we then offer instructional strategies for exploring YouTube such as the ways that students can critically evaluate their own and their video pals' content. Next we address the topics of resistance and incomprehension and propose ways in which teachers can mitigate such obstacles by making a commitment to the core principles of MLE. Finally, throughout the paper we highlight correlations between various exercises and relevant media literacy core principles.

Participatory Culture and Media Literacy Education

"What began as entertainment had turned into a legitimate educational experience." (Ching-Chiu and Polaniecki 2008, 95)

Many educators view Web 2.0 and students' connectivity (along with their various devices) as distractions to learning. Others view technology as tools to increase access to all types of information and experiences via various media, and construe Web 2.0 as an opportunity for intellectual growth and socialization through skill-building, learning, and social networking (Carlson 2005). No matter which camp an educator allies him or herself with, students are connected, learning, and communicating through Facebook, MySpace, and other social networking sites; they are creating and sharing blogs, vlogs (video blogs), and participating in developing content via wikis and other collaborative platforms. As "students these days are more apt to take control of their learning and choose unconventional technological methods to learn better" (Carlson 2005, A34) it is imperative that educators help their students to navigate and participate in this new social space, culture, and learning environment with the requisite skills that constitute media literacy.

Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton and Robison (2009) define a participatory culture as "a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby experienced participants pass along knowledge to novices" (xi). Further, they claim that the four forms of participatory culture—affiliations, expressions, collaborative problem-solving, and circulations—require "new literacies…[that] involve social skills developed through collaboration and networking" (xiii). Jenkins et al. write that the new skills required for media literacy include: play, performance, simulation, appropriation, multitasking, distributed cognition, collective intelligence, judgment, transmedia navigation, networking, and negotiation (xiv).

Negotiation, according to Jenkins et al., refers to "the ability to travel across diverse communities, discerning and respecting multiple perspectives, and grasping and following *alternative norms*" (xiv; emphasis added). Intrinsic to this aspect of media literacy is the ability to allow for diverse opinions, perspectives, and appearances. Similarly, a core principle of media literacy education, according NAMLE (2007), is the exploration of "representations, misrepresentation and lack of representation of cultures and countries in the global community" (section 4.5). The above objectives are critical learning points precisely because Web 2.0 puts students in contact with other students from a variety of social and cultural backgrounds in the somewhat

neutral virtual territory, where they are exposed to each other's differences and commonalities. Participatory culture offers educators endless opportunities to facilitate cross-cultural communication and understanding among their students as those students are already occupying these spaces and making informal connections with their peers online.

Performance, as defined by Jenkins et al., refers to "the ability to adopt alternative identities for the purpose of improvisation and discovery" (xiv), which can also be construed as an apt tool for deconstructing and reconstructing identities or reinforcing existing identities. Similarly, cross-cultural understanding and compassion might be encouraged by practices that focus on this skill as participants 'try on' different ideas, perspectives, and worldviews. We will now offer examples of how YouTube can be used by educators as they focus on working with students to build cross-cultural connections while developing their media literacies.

Participating in this newish culture opens numerous possibilities for teaching and learning but it also requires students to develop many new skills; the more developed a student's media literacies the richer his or her online exchanges will be. In order to define media literacy education (MLE), we rely on the core principles established by the NAMLE (2007). According to the Core Principles document, "the purpose of media literacy education is to help individuals of all ages develop the habits of inquiry and skills of expression that they need to be critical thinkers, effective communicators and active citizens in today's world" (NAMLE 2007,1). Each of the core principles is accompanied by various implications for practice; many of those implications are relevant to our study and will be noted throughout the article.

YouTube as a Platform for Cross-Cultural Exchange and Understanding

Why YouTube? Why not TeacherTube or another site for sharing video that is designed specifically as an educational space for teachers and students to use digital video to supplement a variety of lessons or research projects? From our perspective, the more 'controlled' and 'for educational purposes only' alternatives to YouTube represent less desirable options precisely because they do not allow for those teachable moments in which an instructor, or a student on his or her own, deals with—up front and in real terms—the fact that there is indeed a lot of 'trash' out there, so let's, togeth-

er, figure out how to sift through it, deal with it, interpret it and so on. Therefore, we side with the assertion that although YouTube has been banned in many school districts, "…there are also priceless tools for education. Instead of eliminating this resource from the education community, administrators, teachers, and students need to be taught how to use this valuable tool" (Mullen & Wedwick 2008, 68). Additionally, by blocking access to YouTube in the classroom, educators isolate themselves from the spaces in which students are spending tremendous time and energy and in which much informal learning is taking place.

YouTube is a major part of the "information revolution" that we mentioned in the introduction to this paper. Central to this revolution "are [the] new ways of relating to one another, new forms of discourse, new ways of interacting, new kinds of groups, and new ways of sharing, trading, and collaborating" (Wesch 2009a, para. 4). This revolution is extremely important to education because it means that a large part of learning now happens in informal settings. Most students today have grown up with the world at their fingertips. They use the internet to chat with friends, buy and listen to music, watch videos, blog, share photos, conduct research, and entertain themselves. "They absorb information quickly, in images and video as well as text, from multiple sources simultaneously. They operate at 'twitch speed,' expecting instant responses and feedback," (Duffy 2008, 119). To these students, creation, participation, and collaboration are not new concepts they must learn to embrace, but a familiar part of life.

While these new forms of media might be seen as distracting and disruptive to the academic setting, in fact, they have a great potential to change the way learning takes place. A study conducted in 2005 found that 57% of online teenagers in the United States, ages 12–17—about 12 million youth—create content for the Internet (Duffy 2008, 120). One can only imagine how much that number has grown in the past five years, but even without knowing the exact number, it is clear that students today are embracing the collaborative nature of Web 2.0. By incorporating popular web platforms such as YouTube in the classroom, we can "create a learning community where everyone has a voice [and] anyone can contribute" (Educause 2006, 2). Importantly, we are also incorporating the core principle of media literacy education, which reminds educators that "censorship or other efforts aimed at keeping selected media beyond the access of selected audiences do not achieve the skill-building goals of MLE" (NAMLE

2007, section 4.11). Thus, the focus turns to student-centered learning where students are encouraged to become co-creators of their education.

In an age when we can connect with someone on the other side of the world with the click of a mouse, the importance of cross-cultural understanding is greater than it has ever been. This is one area of education where YouTube as a platform for intended cross-cultural exchange can have a substantial impact. Although YouTube is often perceived as a site filled with frivolous home videos, there is another side to YouTube, one that is empowering people and creating global connections. Everyday there are 20,000 videos uploaded that are addressed to the "YouTube Community" (Wesch 2009b). People are drawn to YouTube—as expressed by many 'vloggers' using the platform—because it allows anyone with Internet access the ability to communicate face-to-face with anyone else across any distance. We recognize that not everyone in the world has access to the Internet; we will explore the "participation gap" in relation to YouTube and cross-cultural education in a future study. However, it is important to note here that students should be made aware of this participation gap as they are engaging in cross-cultural exchanges and ask themselves just how 'different' are my video-pals? Although through this medium, millions of people are able to connect on a regular basis, it is crucial to keep in mind that millions more are kept out of these conversations.

What is most notable, in relation to this study, is the ease in which individual vloggers are engaging in conversation with users from around the world. A popular YouTube vlogger that goes by the name Geriatric1927 is a great example. Harley and Fitzpatrick (2009) carried out a case study of Geriatric1927's video uploads and investigated the ways in which vloggers communicate with one another and the community at large. The study of Geriatric1927's vlog entries on YouTube, videos uploaded by other users in response to his posts, and a review of the conversations taking place in the comments related to his videos, illustrates the dynamic and culturally diverse exchanges taking place on that site. In reference to an original vlog post entitled "Teenagers and Drugs," Geriatric1927 (Peter) responds to an email sent to him via the YouTube messaging service from a young Thai man named Tom. The young man seeks Geriatric1927's advice on how teenagers should come to the decision whether or not to consume drugs. In examining Geriatric1927's original response to Tom and the vlogs uploaded by other users

in response illustrate the conversational dynamic commonly found among vloggers. Harley and Fitzpatrick find that,

> *Even though the primary model for vlogs is one of broadcast, these videos clearly show evidence of a conversation taking place: Peter [Geriatric1927] was engaging in a conversational turn by responding to an initial question he had received from Tom [from Thailand], Robb [from Scotland] and Iva [from Croatia] were in turn engaging in a conversational turn with Peter.* (Harley and Fitzpatrick 2009, 685)

The participants in the above exchange are connected by the medium itself and from that common ground they are able to engage one another. Since "establishing shared understanding or 'common ground' is a critical element of conversations" (Clark; quoted in Harley and Fitzpatrick 2009, 687) students from different cultures are already making connections through social networking sites such as YouTube. The shared space and the requisite skills for participating in that space constitute the common ground upon which they build connections.

The 20,000 videos addressed to the YouTube Community everyday reveal that people are yearning to be connected to something, to be actively engaged rather than passively observing. Neil Postman argued in his book, Amusing Ourselves to Death that our culture used to be shaped by the conversations that happened on television. These conversations were "controlled by the few and designed for the masses" (Postman; quoted by Wesch 2009b, video). Because the conversations were happening on television, they were only one-way conversations. People felt they had to be on TV to have a voice or be significant and that sentiment resulted in an incompetent and indifferent society (Wesch 2009b). However, "we are not interested in creating the same old conversation" (ibid.) and what we see on YouTube is a rejection of that one-way conversation. We see people who are unwilling to accept silence and passivity. They want an identity, they want recognition, they want a voice—and they are using YouTube as their platform.

It is this spirit of participation that makes YouTube the perfect tool for promoting cross-cultural exchange and using that exchange as a vehicle for understanding. Two of the most popular videos on YouTube illustrate this desire for connection and participation. They demonstrate the way people are using this platform to communicate cross-culturally and participate in global movements. The first is the "Free Hugs Cam-

paign" which was started by a man in Sydney, Australia who calls himself Juan Mann. Standing in the middle of a crowded shopping area, he held up a sign that said "Free Hugs," and uploaded the video footage to You-Tube. His video created a true global movement. It has been viewed more than 56 million times and has over 20,000 related videos from around the world—Peru, Sweden, Canada, Venezuela, Spain, Germany, Argentina, Italy, EUA, Poland, Korea (Wesch 2009b).

The other video is from a user, MadV, who wears a mask and uses his anonymity to create collaboration between YouTube users. In 2006, he invited users to "make a stand, to make a statement, to make a difference" (Wesch 2009b) by writing one statement on their hand and holding it up to the camera. It became the most responded to video (at that time) and the messages they sent—regardless of culture, race, gender, and ethnicity—reflect a common theme of unity and connection.

> *They send messages of love, loving yourself, loving others, and they do it in a way that is clear they speak the same, new form of language. They all speak video. They do it beautifully and artistically and they start trying to use the platform to breakdown boundaries.* (ibid.)

The popularity of these videos reveals that YouTube is much more of a social revolution than a technological one. There is a strong desire among YouTube members to be involved, have a voice, and create change. By incorporating this popular medium in the classroom, with students who are already spending a lot of their free time on the Internet, teachers give students the opportunity to find their voice and be heard in a new way. Students are given the chance to transcend geographical, political, and cultural boundaries and collaborate with individuals from around the world and develop core skills in media literacy.

Traditionally cross-cultural education in school has relied on textbooks and teachers' knowledge and experiences. Unfortunately, neither source can be counted on for providing an authentic cross-cultural education. Because education is a vehicle of the State, textbooks are often biased and only present the views of the dominant class. Teachers may also be biased toward other cultures or have only limited cross-cultural knowledge and/or experiences. The curriculum in many schools teaches the history, values, and culture of the dominant group while "neglect[ing] the culture, traditions, and practices of other groups, such as minorities" (Clothey 2010, slide 6). Whereas in the past

cultural education was shaped by the State, textbooks, teachers, and the media, Web 2.0 gives people the power to learn on their own terms. YouTube gives people an opportunity to access various perspectives.

Instructional Strategies for Exploring YouTube

Cross-cultural exchanges carried out through video-pal relationships on YouTube are a viable option for those students who are not prepared to embark upon a study abroad program for various reasons (financial, emotional, or other constraints). By engaging in a digital exchange, students can explore a new culture at their own pace and with significantly fewer resources. It is not our intention to indicate that cross-cultural exchanges via YouTube are commensurate with a study abroad experience but the former certainly affords students the opportunity to dip their feet in the other's waters. The exchange kicks off various conversations: one between the two video-pals, another between each participant and himself, one between the teacher and the class, and finally a conversation with the larger You-Tube community. Through these various conversations, explorations, and exchanges student are made aware of various perspectives and biases.

We will now present some instructional strategies for exploiting the potential opportunities made available by YouTube for acquiring greater cultural awareness, increased self-awareness, and the strengthening of various media literacies. Here, it is important to refer to a point we made earlier in this paper in reference to traditional instructional materials developed under the strong influence of the dominant culture. As a result, students raised on those materials are typically exposed to a limited and highly polished world view, which is more often than not presented as the truth. One way in which educators can use YouTube to mitigate that bias is by adopting a practice proposed by Duffy (2008, 125): create a focus, that is "give students a specific responsibility while viewing videos" such as "search[ing] for two to three video references relating to different perspectives" in response to a question proposed by the teacher. This practice exposes students to various perspectives, including those that even the most well-intentioned teacher might not have access to or be aware of in order to share.

Another noteworthy activity that educators might exploit is the video 'hunting and gathering' practice proposed by James Trier (2007) in his article, *"Cool" Engagements with YouTube: Part 1*. In the context of video-pals, partners will be asked to com-

municate and mutually decide on a topic of common interest that they would both like to explore. Partners would then undertake the process of 'hunting and gathering' for various media sources related to their chosen topic. The third part of the exercise is for each partner to create a short digital mash-up in which they use original content and found content to describe the topic at hand from their own perspective.

These assignments would be valuable to students for a number of reasons. Selecting a topic of interest to both students creates a common ground, which is the essential starting point of communication. Additionally, the 'hunting and gathering' process helps both students become aware of the multitude of perspectives through which one can view a certain topic. Finally, through this production process teachers can encourage students to ask questions designed to strengthen their media literacies.

Questions might include the following: (1) How does my presentation differ from my video-pals? (2) Which, if any, of these differences might be attributed to cultural differences? and (3) How did my understanding of this topic change during the process of production? As one student, Keith, in a case study carried out by Ching-Chiu and Polaniecki (2008) remarked about his experience producing a digital video, "It's not about putting a bunch of clips together; to get the messages across, I had to listen over and over and edit it" (p. 99). This is a profoundly useful experience for all students because half of the process of understanding another's worldview and/or culture requires one to become more aware of his or her own cultural patterns of thinking, behaving, and viewing the world.

The connections made between students and their video-pals will help them learn about other cultures in a way that cannot be achieved through a textbook. The core principles of media literacy also touch on the importance of awareness of and tolerance for multiple perspectives. As articulated in the NAMLE Core Principles document: "MLE explores representations, misrepresentations and lack of representation of cultures and countries in the global community" (section 4.5); "MLE integrates media texts that present diverse voices, perspectives and communities" (section 5.1); and "MLE includes opportunities to examine alternative media and international perspectives" (section 5.2). Notably, the United Nations declared 2001 the "Year of the Dialogue of Civilizations" because of its belief that tolerance is at the heart of international relations in the twenty-first century and can be achieved through the promotion of a dialogue among civilizations (United Nations 2001). The UN defines the dialogue among civilizations as "a process between and within civilizations, founded on inclusion, and a collective desire to learn, uncover and examine assumptions, unfold shared meaning and core values and integrate multiple perspectives through dialogue" (3). The United Nations commitment to the dialogue of civilizations underscores the importance of cross-cultural exchange and understanding. Video-pals are an excellent way for teachers to bring this dialogue among civilizations into the classroom. The conversations that will occur as the result of these video posts will allow students to uncover the truth about and find common ground with someone from another culture in a way they never thought possible.

Dialogue on YouTube is informal and asynchronous. Although YouTube is one of the most public spaces in the world, it can also feel very private because it allows people to watch— anonymously—from any place in the world (that has the infrastructure to support it). "This anonymity combined with physical distance and rare and ephemeral dialogue gives people the freedom to experience humanity without fear or social anxiety. […] It allows [one] to watch other people without staring or making them feel uncomfortable" (Wesch 2009b). Thus, YouTube eliminates many of the obstacles that often prevent studying someone from another culture or social group in 'real time.'

One of the most interesting aspects of the asynchronous nature of YouTube is that it allows contributions to be recorded and replayed several times. Reflecting on Marshall McLuhan's ideas, we see that replay allows for greater self-reflection and awareness, as illustrated by the remarks made by Keith in reference to the case study carried out by Ching-Chiu and Polaniecki (2008). Interestingly, self-awareness plays an important role in fostering cross-cultural understanding. A study on cross-cultural competence in multicultural educational settings found that "individuals do not become sensitive and open to different ethnic groups until and unless they develop a positive sense of self, including an awareness and acceptance of their own ethnic group" (McAllister & Irvine 2000, 19). Because YouTube allows students to replay their recordings again and again, video-pals not only allow students to learn about another culture, but also to gain an awareness of their own identities and cultures.

Going through the process of producing one's own video, students become more acutely aware of the ways in which their message is being framed and may be potentially received. For example, Justin, Keith's partner in producing a video about the War on Terror, "felt a responsibility not to misrepresent any information in their video….Justin tried not to take any one side (despite his strong personal feelings) but to present as much information as possible and give an unbiased portrayal of the facts" (Ching-Chui and Polaniecki 2008, 99). Ching-Chiu and Polaniecki remark on Justin's comments about the production process, observing that the student "seemed conscious about how viewers might react to their video and therefore sought ways to deliver his message as matter-of-factly as possible" (99). This case study illustrates the capacity of students to engage in critical self-reflection during the production process as they consider the implications of the ways in which they frame their messages.

The above is an example of the types of questions that arise in students' minds as they work through the video production process. Referring to the key questions put forth in the NAMLE core principles document (2007), teachers might encourage students to ask the following: (1) Who might benefit from this message? (2) Who might be harmed by it? (3) Why might this message matter to me (or others)? (4) What is my interpretation of this and what do I learn about myself from my reaction or interpretation? (5) What ideas, values, information, and/or points of view are overt? Implied? The latter question in particular should lead students, as guided by their teacher, to reflect on their own videos and ask the following: What messages do my video(s) send about my culture? How might someone from another culture interpret my video(s)? How do I interpret my video-pal's production?

This is a crucial activity because too often students have difficulty seeing the "permanence of media on the internet, and the potentially vast audience once anything is posted" (Beaudoin 2010, 106). Students must understand that although YouTube has a set of *Community Guidelines*, videos posted to the site are not viewed by an editor or other official before they go online and become available to the public. The authors of videos that violate copyright or other rules may be penalized or have their account terminated,

But how many millions of viewers may witness a posting before it is removed? What one student may post as a funny personal video may become "viral" and represent her image or work to millions of viewers beyond her original intent" (Beaudoin 2010, 106).

This message—'beyond her original intent'—is something that is extremely important to keep in mind as students create videos to be uploaded online. Although the video may feel like an intimate conversation between a student and their video-pal, it can instantly be viewed my millions of people all over the world. This should help students take the assignment seriously and understand the importance of being cognizant of the kind of images they are putting forth not only of themselves, but of their culture as well. However, this type of exposure is also one of the greatest strengths of the platform because it creates a space for a much larger dialogue between users around the world whether they choose to respond with their own videos or by making comments.

Here it is important to consider the fact that not all students will readily accept a cross-cultural exchange experience. In the next section of this paper we elaborate on ways in which educators can respond to resistance and incomprehension of digital cross-cultural exchanges.

Working through Resistance and Incomprehension

Lessons on cross-cultural education can lead to resistance or incomprehension by students due to their exposure to differing worldviews, cultural beliefs, and values. Too, just as media literacy "is not a 'have it or not' competency, but rather an ever evolving continuum of skills, knowledge, attitudes, and actions" (NAMLE 2007, section 3.1), exploring a new culture and developing an understanding and tolerance for that culture is a dynamic and ongoing process in which there is always more to learn and which cannot be accomplished within the boundaries of a single lesson or group of lessons. Indeed, students will have differing capacities for socio-cultural exploration, various degrees of readiness for coping with alternative worldviews, ideas and values that may be at odds with their own, and so on. When conducting lessons on cross-cultural education, teachers should make it clear that everyone is not always going to agree on everything—nor should they—but the point in cross-cultural education is to open people's minds to new ideas, raise their awareness about different ways of life, and teach people to be tolerant of

differences.

In order to address resistance and incomprehension in cross-cultural education, teachers must create a comfortable learning environment where students feel safe and free to express their disagreement and diverse points of view. Such issues can be accounted for if teachers make a commitment to the core principles of MLE. For example, the fourth core principle is about developing "informed, reflective and engaged participants essential for a democratic society" (NAMLE 2007, section 4). To this end, "MLE recognizes that *HOW* we teach matters as much as *WHAT* we teach. Classrooms should be places where student input is respected, valued, and acted upon" (section 4.8). In line with this idea is the sixth core principle, which states "media literacy education affirms that people use their individual skills, beliefs and experiences to construct their own meanings from media messages" (section 6). This is an essential point to our article—in cross-cultural education, it is not the teacher's job to tell students what to think about any given culture. Instead, it is their job to help students understand "how they can arrive at informed choices that are most consistent with their own values" (section 6.1). Teachers must emphasize to their students that it is okay for there to be disagreement, but students must know how to express those disagreements in a productive way. Students must be able to distinguish between disagreement of values and incomprehension.

For example, a student growing up in a middle-class suburb in the United States is likely to trust police officers. In contrast, a student living in a country that is rife with political corruption and social instability is more likely to operate on an opposite default mode, that is, unlikely to trust the police. Imagine a video-pal exchange in which a student from Cairo, Egypt is telling his video pal a story about getting lost. The American student might become confused by his friend's anecdote when the Egyptian student tells him that he was lost and then saw several police officers, became frightened, and so quickly hid outside of their view. For the American student who is lost, a group of police officers is typically a comforting sight and an opportunity to get help finding one's way home. Once a teacher makes students aware of the assumption underlying their confusion—that is, in the United States the police are trustworthy, reliable, and accountable and therefore that must be the case everywhere—they are likely to better understand their video pal's account.

Another important point to keep in mind throughout this process is that some videos—whether presented by the teacher or those produced in the video-pals series—may be received with cynicism. In these cases, teachers must emphasize the fact that a key objective of media literacy education is to teach students to be skeptical, but not cynical (NAMLE 2007, section 4.2).

> *The skeptic demands evidence, and rightly so. The cynic assumes that what he or she is being told is false. Cynicism is a form of gullibility—the cynic rejects facts without evidence, just as the naïve person accepts facts without evidence. And deception born of cynicism can be just as costly or potentially as dangerous to health and well-being as any other form of deception* (Jackson and Jamieson, 2007, 175; quoted by Mihailidis 2009, p. 53).

Cynicism is thus a greatly undesired quality in cross-cultural education because it is not an expression of critical analysis, but rather a form of gullibility as stated above. Skepticism, on the other hand, is a crucial aspect of analyzing participatory media for the purpose of cross-cultural education. The reason for this is that there are many videos on YouTube that contain unverifiable and stereotypical information (Beaudion 2009)—information that can easily be accepted as truth if students are not trained to question the bias that exists in any given media message. Consequently, one of the main objectives of the core principles is that "teachers do not train students to ask IF there is a bias in a particular message (since all media messages are biased), but rather, WHAT the substance, source, and significance of a bias might be" (NAMLE 2007, section 1.6). Although students may easily be able to identify bias in a traditional media message, it is possible it will be much more difficult for them to identify bias in a participatory media message because these messages are produced by their 'peers' whereas traditional messages are produced by corporations. Therefore, if teachers do not take the time to help students understand how to identify biases in participatory media messages, these cross-cultural exchanges may further stereotypes rather than help to break down barriers.

It is inevitable that each student will have a different experience interacting with their video-pal, and will therefore have a different opinion or perspective about the culture being studied and the exchange process itself. When the class comes together to discuss these exchanges, there will undoubtedly be students

who always share their experience and opinions, and those who never do. In order for students to gain a well-rounded idea of the culture they are studying, it is important for them to have access to as many points of view and experiences as possible. This is where Trier's 'hunting and gathering' idea can come again into play. The teacher might ask students to search for a video, or create one on their own, that reflects their opinions and perspective—based on the interactions they have had—of their video-pal's home culture. Watching these videos as a class can spark an interesting discussion on the culture under study because it prompts students—especially those who normally do not participate in class—to evaluate how they are interpreting their video-pal's culture and how their own personal experiences, values, and beliefs are influencing their interpretations. In addition to encouraging students to self-reflect on this activity, it gives the entire class the opportunity to gain a greater understanding of the culture and hear points of view they may not have otherwise considered.

This activity, too, ties into the idea of cross-cultural education stimulating resistance and incomprehension among some. By encouraging students to find or create their own videos related to the culture they are studying, the teacher should be able to determine which students are having difficulty engaging in the cultural exchange and who might be resistant to learning about that culture. Through the activity, the teacher can lead a discussion that addresses the conflict and helps students express their resistance. Resistance among students should not be ignored; indeed, it should be looked upon as an opportunity to deepen ones understanding of self and the other. Students should understand that tolerance does not mean total agreement. It is acceptable to disagree with certain cultural beliefs or traditions while still being tolerant of that culture. Additionally, it might be interesting to assign this activity at various points throughout the exchange; that is, before any exchanges take place in an effort to identify preconceived notions and stereotypes, after a couple of exchanges to evaluate any changes in attitude that may have taken place, and again at the end of the exchange project.

Conclusion

In this paper we have argued that educators can guide students to engage in digital cross-cultural exchanges via YouTube, a site where many students are already making contact with others from around the world. The specific skills and competencies required for producing one's own video—to be shared with a video-pal— such as reflection on what one wants to say and how s/he will say it, are also useful skills that facilitate cross-cultural dialogue. We have put forward numerous examples of the ways in which video production and communication taking place in social networking sites such as YouTube are indeed collaborative and conversational as illustrated, in particular, in the Geriatric1927 case study. In addition to producing videos as a means to communicate and further develop one's own media literacies, we also suggested that teachers and students engage in 'hunting and gathering' exercises to collect various media that address the same topic from multiple perspectives.

The core principles highlight the fact that media literacy education includes both analysis and expression (NAMLE 2007, section 2.1). Therefore, having students undertake video production projects as well as 'hunting and gathering' exercises affords them the opportunity to interact with media as thoughtful producers and critical consumers. We have also suggested that students create mash-ups with the media they collect in the 'hunting and gathering' exercise, which "enables students to express their own ideas through multiple forms of media…and helps students make connections between comprehension and inference-making print, visual, and audio media" (ibid., section 2.2) as they sift through their stockpile and edit, remix, and upload.

We also addressed potential resistance and incomprehension that may be exhibited or experienced by participants and argued that ultimately resistance can be a lever for deeper learning and should not be overlooked or ignored by educators. In contrast, teachers should work with students to explore their resistance in an effort to facilitate deeper reflection and exploration and exploit such instances of resistance as an opportunity to exercise that student's capacity to explore ideas that are unfamiliar or foreign to him or her. Working with students who resist cross-cultural exchanges can lead to a maturation of those students media literacies related to openness toward difference, dealing with representations or lack of representation of countries in the global community (section 4.5), and cultivating receptivity "to media that present diverse voices, perspectives, and communities" (section 5.1). Finally, by working with students to explore their resistance educators can guide students to further analyze their own biases.

One notable strength in a project such as this one is the fact that it points to the "efficacy of online exploration is a legitimate form of education." We con-

tend that educators who fail to include opportunities for online exploration within formal learning experiences will contribute to the development of a "digital abyss" as argued by Mullen and Wedwick (2008, 66) and will forfeit numerous chances for students and teachers to engage in co-learning experiences that can enhance their respective media literacies. Whether educators deem themselves to be confirmed digerati or not is irrelevant. Indeed, what matters most is that educators are ready to embrace different sites for teaching and learning and are willing to play the role of teacher, learner, or facilitator as the environment and challenge at hand dictates. It is crucial that educators assume their role and responsibility in helping students to become critical, informed, and literate participants in this emerging culture.

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