

## Critical perspectives on social media in the international classroom (0095)

Tunde Varga-Atkins

University of Liverpool, UK

### **Internationalisation and social media in higher education**

“the progressive educator must always be moving out on his or her own, continually reinventing me and reinventing what it means to be democratic in his or her own specific cultural and historical context” (Paulo Freire, 1997, p.308).

Social media platforms have an increasing presence in today’s higher education classroom (Tess, 2013) in the form of wikis, blogs, microblogs, social networking, media sharing and curating sites. Literature on the uses of social media concern the themes of developing professionalism, digital identity (Chretien et al, 2009; Guseh et al, 2009) enabling collaboration and communication in classroom and professional learning communities (Lewis & Rush, 2013; West, 2015) and developing students’ media literacy through knowledge-creation in different media (Kivunja, 2013). Few studies discuss the use of social media from a critical angle (with the notable exception of Fenwick’s recent paper, 2016). Using such open, participative global platforms can extend the physical classroom over temporal, cultural and national boundaries (Hung and Yuen 2010), and so, offer valuable opportunities for internationalisation.

This conceptual paper adopts the perspective of cultural equity with regards to internationalisation of the curriculum (Singh, 2005; Harrison, 2015). Its aims to probe into the use of social media from a critical perspective: What are the consequences of choosing a social media platform in the international classroom comprising of Western and Chinese students? Is the use of the ‘global’ social media platforms sensitive to the internationalisation agenda striving for intercultural understanding and equity? And finally, the ultimate purpose of this paper is to answer how social media can be used in a way that provides beneficial opportunities for internationalising the curriculum based on equity?

### **Theoretical approach**

The theoretical backbone of the paper draws on three main critical arguments, developed in the first part of the paper. Firstly, that technology choice, such as ‘Twitter (Western/global platform) or Weibo’ (Chinese platform)?, is not neutral. Technology is not simply an instrument, but a wider socio-cultural phenomenon (Bayne 2014; Oliver, 2013). Secondly, that in order to develop students’ critical media literacy, educators need to pay more attention to the nature of the *social* in social media. Thirdly, that in an equitable international classroom both Chinese and Western students need to travel. Travel is a metaphor for educational fieldwork (Singh, 2005), a journey into a foreign land that involves experiencing not only different nations, their culture and language, but as Harrison (2015) suggests above, different knowledge, perspectives and epistemologies. Luckily for 21<sup>st</sup> century educators, such travel can be virtual and the path digitally trodden, e.g. via Twitter, a microblogging platform. Co-travel in the international classroom would mean that both

Western students and international students would need to be exposed to different cultural perspectives and epistemologies. This involves paying attention to the choice of microblogging platforms.

### Critical literature review

The second part of the paper reviews the use of social media from the above critical perspective, searching for examples that promote internationalisation in a mixed Chinese and Western classroom. The literature review is conducted using a critical framework, recording:

- the students' **nationality** and **country of study**: Home-Western (UK/US/AUS etc); Home-Asian/Chinese; or International students (Asian/Chinese students in a Western country);
- the **context** of social media use: education?
- the **purpose** of social media use: for educational/classroom uses?
- the **choice of microblogging platform**? Twitter, Weibo, both?

### Findings

It is surprising that studies at the cross-section of internationalisation and social media are scarce given the global nature of such media. Many of the above social media examples in a Chinese/Western international context concern out-of-the-classroom aspects of student life and cultural, linguistic adjustment of students. Few studies deal with the potential of the societal aspect of media in developing critical literacy of students, focusing attention to issues of ownership, access and inclusion by different cultural groups. Critical perspectives laid out at the start of the paper however argued that educational uses would need to have a regard for the societal aspect of media. What follows therefore is such an imagined educational design modelled on co-travel. It also argues that within an internationalisation agenda, critical media literacy is not a matter of individual student skill, but a communal concern (Goodfellow, 2011).

### Imagining social media use for the international classroom

The final part of the paper responds to Freire's call for democracy to be reinvented (Freire, 1997, p.308) with an imagined educational design based on the idea of co-travel, drawing on a montage of related examples from extant literature. To fill this gap, an equitable educational design of social media was imagined, which involves using a plurality of social media platforms as sites of travel: Weibo *and* Twitter for Chinese and Western students. By having to engage with a 'foreign' platform, both home and international students can move to a critical stance and reflexivity to observe how power and control may influence knowledge representation, communication and creation in their discipline (Fuchs, 2014) as well as contributing to their intercultural exchange.

### Implications

The significance of this conceptual paper is to bring the intersection of two fields, social media use in HE and internationalisation, under focus. It highlights that the curricular choice and use of social media has implications for the internationalisation agenda striving

for intercultural understanding and equity. This is to highlight that although digital technology can contribute to enabling cultural, temporal and geographical boundary-crossings, a critical perspective is necessary to ensure that the choice of and engagement in online spaces do not replicate existing power structures. This is demonstrated by situating the paper in a Chinese-Western context, in which lack of access to Twitter in China is a visible example of socio-cultural context of technology. Choosing Twitter over Weibo, or vice versa, can reveal whose voice is privileged in the curriculum, or what perspectives remain excluded.

Re-examining educational uses of social media from a critical pedagogy perspective surfaces implications for the digital capabilities agenda in higher education (JISC, 2016). It also highlights that developing students' critical social media literacy is a matter of global citizenship.

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