

Teaching Language, Promoting Social Justice: A Dialogic Approach to Using Social Media

Sardar M. Anwaruddin

Abstract

The article is concerned with teaching language by utilizing social media from a social justice perspective. It makes an argument for taking a dialogic approach to pedagogy based on serendipity and contingent scaffolding. The article is inspired by a small but growing body of literature known as Critical Computer-Assisted Language Learning. First, I provide a brief introduction to Computer-Assisted Language Learning, and its recent turn toward a critical approach. Then, I discuss social media, and what “social” means when it precedes the word “media.” Next, I describe how social media are being used in language education, and why the dominant methods of use may not prepare language learners as justice-oriented democratic citizens. A key barrier I identify in this regard is media users’ increasing ability to filter what they want to see and hear. To re-think the pedagogical uses of social media, I draw from Mikhail Bakhtin’s works and propose a dialogic approach, which may be helpful for language teachers and teacher educators.

KEYWORDS: SOCIAL MEDIA; SOCIAL JUSTICE; DEMOCRACY; CRITICAL CALL; DIALOGUE; SERENDIPITY

The field of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) has grown exponentially over the last five decades. Although the initial focus was on the computer, the field has gradually embraced various types of digital technology and their potential contributions to the teaching and learning of languages. Technology developers, researchers, educational administrators, and classroom teachers have expressed a strong interest in the affordances of digital tools.

Affiliation

York University, Toronto, Canada.
email: sardar15@yorku.ca

As a result, the field currently has a vast literature base—comprising empirical research and speculative proposals. Proponents of technology use have convinced many national governments and international organizations to invest large amounts of resources into the education sector and integrate digital technologies into the curriculum. Studies have shown that students generally have positive attitudes toward new technologies; however, “the evidence that technology has a direct beneficial impact on linguistic outcomes is slight and inconclusive” (Macaro, Handley, & Walter, 2012, p. 1).

With much enthusiasm for new technological artifacts, what often bypasses scholarly and popular discussions are questions such as who benefits from introducing new technology, how technology interacts with particular social-cultural-economic contexts, how teachers and students interpret new technologies, and how technology really “assists” language learning. One strand of work that tackles these kinds of question is Critical CALL. It is a relatively recent development within the field. Perhaps it is safe to attribute the beginning of this strand to the 22nd EuroCALL Conference held in 2015 at the University of Padova in Italy. The Critical CALL Conference drew inspiration from the body of work known as Critical Applied Linguistics (Pennycook, 2001). In particular, the conference focused on the need to “question the assumptions that lie at the basis of our praxis, ideas that have become ‘naturalized’ and are not called into question” (Helm, Bradley, Guarda, & Thouësy, 2015, p. xiii). The conference was also concerned about “the relationship between the macro and the micro, an engagement with issues of power and inequality and an understanding of how our classrooms and conversations are related to broader social, cultural and political relations” (Helm et al., 2015, p. xiii). Thus, a critical approach to CALL challenges us to explore the intersections of power, in/equality, and language education in diverse socio-cultural contexts, not just within the four walls of the classroom. Inspired by Critical CALL, I now focus particularly on social media and English language teaching.

Social Media

The term “social media” is often used as a blanket concept in scholarly and popular literatures. In general, it refers to internet-based platforms that facilitate instant communications among many users. Social media are built upon the characteristics of the second generation internet use, which means that media users interact with each other and participate in the production and distribution of contents. Social media provide affordances such as user-defined linkages between users and content, simpler ways of sharing content, ease of personal profiling, and inter-technology applications connecting multiple sites (Greenhow, Robelia, & Hughes, 2009).

An initial question in any discussion about social media is: what is *social* about social media? Some argue that all media are social in the sense that they involve more than one social actor. For example, when a person listens to the radio, she/he may intellectually engage with the ideas expressed by a commentator on the radio. Thus, the radio can easily be considered a social medium. Others disagree with this view, and maintain that media become social when they connect many individuals, facilitate communication, and create communities. While the relationship between these conflicting arguments remains unsettled, Fuchs (2014) presents a conceptual framework of human sociality that is helpful to understand the social nature of media. This framework consists of four forms of sociality: (a) cognition and information, (b) communication, (c) community, and (d) collaboration and cooperation. First, when we receive information from the internet, it does not mean that we do nothing with the information. We may critically evaluate or discuss with a friend the validity of the received information. In this way, our cognitive activities become social. Second, communication is a vital form of human sociality because without it we cannot survive in the world. Third, some forms of communication lead to the formation of human communities that are based on common interests or emotions. The fourth form of sociality is collaboration and cooperation. This kind of sociality requires information, communication, and community; but it is more than the sum of the three. Its principal aim is to strengthen human agency and condition through commitment to social justice.

In the light of this conceptual framework, “all media are social, in the sense that they establish and maintain relations between and among humans as individuals and collectives, increasingly across space and time. No medium is more social than any other medium” (Jensen, 2015, p. 1). My opinion is that all media are social, but in varying degrees. A particular medium may contain the features of cognition and communication, but may lack in its ability to form human community or facilitate cooperative work. Hence, one distinguishing feature of what is now broadly referred to as social media should be their ability to facilitate “many-to-many” communication with the *possibility* of forming communities and supporting collaborative and cooperative work. Therefore, we may cautiously agree with Fuchs (2014) that:

Media are not technologies, but techno-social systems. They have a technological level of artefacts that enable and constrain a social level of human activities that create knowledge that is produced, diffused and consumed with the help of the artefacts of the technological level. (p. 37)

It follows that the concept of social media is always entangled with the question of human agency. It also begs questions concerning how we perform

various forms of sociality through media in ways that facilitate or constrain the formation of a just society.

A Brief Note on Social Justice Education

What social justice education (SJE) actually means is a matter of debate. A lack of consensus is not a problem in itself because SJE is too rich a concept to be articulated in a short definition. However, there are commonalities across views. Most conceptualizations of SJE refer to “values that are broadly recognized as ‘progressive,’” and they tend “to depend on or endorse a robust notion of democracy and sees education as an indispensable site of social and political participation” (Bialystok, 2014, p. 418). Ayers, Quinn, and Stovall (2009) discussed three pillars or principles of SJE: equity, activism, and social literacy. Here, equity refers to fairness and equal access to high quality educational experiences. By activism, these authors mean learners’ participation and agency to observe, understand, and if necessary change the conditions that negatively influence human lives. Finally, the concept of social literacy refers to the principle of resistance to capitalism, consumerism, and other isms that restrict the flourishing of desirable identities and conditions of happiness. Ayers et al. (2009) believe that “education for social justice is the root of teaching and schooling in a democratic society, the rock upon which we build democracy” (p. xiv).

In short, SJE is about ensuring a fairer and just society where individuals will be recognized with dignity and respect and have equal opportunities to pursue happiness. From this perspective, teaching for social justice is essentially a democratic act. It is based on “the idea that every human being is of equal and incalculable value, entitled to decent standards of freedom and justice, and that any violation of those standards must be acknowledged, testified to, and fought against” (Ayers, 2010, p. 791). As in other sub-fields of education, in TESOL the issue of social justice has been a pressing concern. A recent edited volume entitled *Social Justice in English Language Teaching* suggests that “English language learners are often on the margins of society,” and “those of us who teach them must work to advocate for their needs” (Hastings & Jacob, 2016, p. x). It follows, then, that we must pay attention to how social media are being utilized for English language teaching, and how such utilization may contribute to the achievement of a just and democratic society.

Social Media in English Language Teaching

As I write this article, my social media newsfeed shows that TESOL International Association is organizing a symposium in Vancouver, Canada. The symposium aims to galvanize language teachers’ technology skillset. Reviewing the

CALL literature, attending academic conferences, and talking with many colleagues, I have come to believe that one of the most preferred technology types among English language teachers and researchers is social media. A dominant view in this regard is that social media “have the potential to facilitate language learning” and “to increase learner autonomy, collaboration, and collective knowledge-building experiences” (Liu et al., 2015, p. 141). Proponents claim that social media can enhance students’ social cohesion and increase peer-to-peer collaboration (Toetenel, 2014). Others cite social media’s affordances such as “native speakers can give feedback to non-native speakers” and “anyone can upload content that can be a source of common interest amongst group members” (Liu et al., 2015, p. 142).

Meskill and Quah (2013) have identified three categories of research: the online environment and its affordances, online social and affective dimensions, and pedagogical processes. The first category focuses on “the design, tools and resources of a given online social media environment” (Meskill & Quah, 2013, p. 43). The second category utilizes a variety of techniques to elicit “learners’ reactions and reflections.” The third category of research investigates “teaching practices with social media technologies” (Meskill & Quah, 2013, p. 43). It focuses on utilizing social media as neutral tools in order to increase learners’ motivation, help them gain confidence, and develop their self-efficacy. A typical study exemplifying this trend would be the one that investigates social media’s role in developing second language writing. For instance, Dizon (2016) worked with two groups of Japanese students: the experimental group used Facebook while the control group used paper-and-pencil for writing. He concluded that “the experimental group made more significant gains in terms of writing fluency” (p. 1249).

While this is a promising area of research, I argue that it has been heavily influenced by technological determinism and instrumentalism. Technological determinism refers to a widespread assumption that technology is an autonomous force, which determines human activities and shapes social changes. In other words, technology has “an autonomous functional logic that can be explained without reference to society” (Feenberg, 2009, p. 141). This view of technology has had a tremendous impact on the field of CALL (e.g., Anwaruddin, 2018; Thomas & Peterson, 2014; Warschauer, 1998). A deterministic position sees the relationship between language education and technology in terms of cause-and-effect. Following Selwyn (2012), I argue that such a view “serves to obscure the many non-technological factors at play in the educational use of technology... Issues such as gender, race, social class, identity, power, inequality and so on are all sidelined in favour of the technological” (p. 83).

On the other hand, instrumentalism is based on the belief that technology is neutral: it is neither good nor bad. Its effects depend on how it is used.

In the field of CALL, technological instrumentalism finds its expression in the literature that supports the use of digital technology to raise students' motivation level, support peer-to-peer communication, and seek immediate feedback from teachers. Instrumentalism is adopted when teachers' role is emphasized to achieve pre-determined goals. As Zheng, Yim, and Warschauer (2018) argue, "potential benefits [of social media] do not entirely or even principally flow from the technological tools themselves, but rather rely on teachers' skillful integration of the tools into language teaching tailored to the given needs and contexts" (p. 3). Here technology is viewed as convenient tools in the hands of skillful craftspersons.

Both of these views of technology—as deterministic and as neutral—are limiting because they tend to ignore how various non-technological issues such as socio-economic class, gender, and previous educational experiences factor into the pedagogical benefits of social media use. They also treat social media as an ideologically-neutral site disembedded from particular socio-cultural and political contexts (Selwyn, 2017). In this sense, the dominant approaches to social media use are antithetical to the principles and aims of Critical CALL. For example, there is a disturbing lack of discussions in the literature about how the idea of the social is being used by media corporations "for no other reason than to extract value" (Lovink, 2016, p. 41). The growing area of research on social media analytics is an example of how users' information is gathered and analyzed to make marketing decisions and activities, and thus to maximize corporate profits. Universities are now offering degree programs to teach how to analyze data collected from social media users. The potential abuses of such practice have been demonstrated by the recent Facebook data scandal about harvesting personal information of millions of users allegedly to influence the 2016 presidential election in the United States (Confessore, 2018). Similarly, there is a lack of discussion about various features of social media that are designed to encourage users to "remain amongst 'friends'" and not to "encounter the Other" (Lovink, 2016, p. 41). Taking a Critical CALL perspective, we need to remember that "technologies are never neutral or disembedded from particular socio-economic interests and ideologies. [Therefore,] the ideal for the transformative practitioner in this respect is to both *critique* and *utilize*" technologies in sync with the goals of criticality (Morgan, 2009, p. 94, emphasis original).

Without doubt, social media have the potential to attain some goals of Critical CALL, for example, how classroom pedagogies may relate to broader cultural and political environments (Helm et al., 2015). However, I argue that in order to achieve such goals, educators need to re-conceptualize the possibilities and limits of social media use for teaching and learning languages. Such re-conceptualization will have to resist dominant "discussions of digital

technology in education [which] tend to allow little space for critical reflection” (Buckingham, 2016, p. 177). Educators also need to challenge the “assumption that participation or creative production is a good thing in itself, and that it either stands in for or automatically generates critical understanding in its own right” (Buckingham, 2016, p. 177). In order to initiate discussions and empirical inquiries that may counter the unwarranted assumptions mentioned above, first we need to know how social media are being used in contemporary political arenas. Such knowledge is crucial for utilizing social media for teaching languages from a social justice perspective.

Background to Technology and Democracy

The political scientist Benjamin Barber (1998–1999) wrote, “For better or worse, technology is with us; our fate will depend on how we use or abuse it” (p. 575). Barber made this statement in his musing over future relationships between technology and democracy. He asked questions that have intrigued many scholars interested in democracy and social justice. A few of his questions include: “Will technology nourish or undermine democratic institutions? Is technological growth likely to support or corrupt freedom? Are we finally to be mastered by the tools with which we aspire to master the world?” (p. 573). After discussing these and other related questions, Barber alluded to a popular belief that technology would foster the possibility of more open politics and a strong democracy.

With the advent of Web 2.0, many believed that social media would liberate citizens from oppressive practices of states, traditional media, and neoliberal capitalism. They also hoped that social media would enable citizens to resist forces that threaten to foreclose the possibility of a strong democracy. As Loader and Mercea (2012) wrote, “Equipped with social media, the citizen no longer has to be a passive consumer of political party propaganda, government spin or mass media news, but is actually enabled to challenge discourses, share alternative perspectives and publish their own opinions” (p. 3). These are ambitious assumptions, and they require empirical justifications. How are citizens challenging oppressive discourses and evaluating alternative perspectives?

Dominant social media such as Twitter and Facebook are resulting in knowledge fragmentation, political polarization, and economic inequality. This is quite contrary to what was hoped for. The internal logic of how popular social media work demands such fragmentation and polarization. For example, Ott (2017) has discussed three key features of Twitter: simplicity, impulsivity, and incivility. First, due to “its character limitation, Twitter structurally disallows the communication of detailed and sophisticated messages” (Ott, 2017, p. 60). Second, tweets are often inspired by emotional charges, which

transmit quickly through various social media. Third, Twitter promotes informality (no need to write “Dear So and So”) and depersonalizes communication. These features undermine “the social norms that uphold civility” and encourage “users to engage in both divisive and derisive communication” (Ott, 2017, p. 62). Similarly, Facebook’s algorithm constructs a unique personality for each user based on their “likes,” links they share, and people they follow. In accordance with this constructed personality, Facebook sends notifications, news, and advertisements tailored to the taste of the users. Thus, users of social media now have greater capacity to filter what they (want to) see, and the media companies have better algorithms to personalize contents in the name of consumer choice. This kind of digital tracking is being effectively used to profile, police, and punish the poor (Eubanks, 2018).

Another outcome of contemporary media design is what Cass Sunstein (2017) describes as the construction of “echo chambers” where media users hear an echo of their own voice. Such echo chambers are made possible by people’s astonishing power to choose and filter information. However, as Sunstein (2017) argues, “in a well-functioning democracy, people do not live in echo chambers or information cocoons” (p. ix). An inevitable result of living in echo chambers is political polarization without the possibility of dialogue. A finding from the United States may be illustrative here:

In 1960, just 5 percent of Republicans and 4 percent of Democrats said that they would feel “displeased” if their child married outside their political party. By 2010, those numbers have reached 49 and 33 percent, respectively – far higher than the percentage of people who would be “displeased” if their child married someone with a different skin color. (Sunstein, 2017, p. 10)

In order to offset this kind of polarization, we need to re-think our ability to construct information cocoons and its consequences. Although a greater power to choose contents on social media solves some problems, it propels the spread of falsehood and hatred for those who are not like “us.” In this regard, Sunstein (2017) proposes “an *architecture of serendipity* – for the sake of individual lives, group behavior, innovation, and democracy itself” (p. 5). This is important to counteract homophily and to embrace unfiltered information and opposing perspectives. Thus, serendipity becomes a necessary tool for strong democracy.

Strong democracy rests on citizens’ collective needs and goals negotiated through open dialogue. It takes nourishment from people’s willingness to leave the comfort zone of like-minded friends and to encounter the Other. However, what we see in contemporary politics is far from the principles of strong democracy. Instead, what we have is a weak democracy. My conception of weak democracy is similar to Iris Young’s (1993) notion of interest-based

democracy. Young (1993) observed that democracy was being used “primarily as a process of expressing one’s preferences and demands, and registering them in a vote” (p. 126). In this view of democracy, “citizens never need to leave their own private and parochial pursuits and recognize their fellows in a public setting to address one another about their collective, as distinct from individual, needs and goals” (p. 126). Additionally, this kind of democracy “allows for the majority to violate the rights of a minority if it seems to be in the majority’s interests to do so” (Young, 1993, p. 124). Unfortunately, this kind of weak democracy seems to be on the rise all over the world where democratic process has turned into a battle of ballots (Kurlantzick, 2013). Once the votes are counted, the majority party starts to rule by their will and suppress dissenting voices. Dialogue disappears from political arenas.

Re-Thinking the Pedagogical Use of Social Media

Teaching is never a value free activity. We teach students to become particular kinds of citizen. In the light of Critical CALL, we do not just want students to be fluent in their target languages. We also want them to be critical thinkers and democratic citizens striving for justice. As Morgan (2009) wrote, despite some theoretical and pedagogical differences within the critical scholarship, “in common is the assumption that educators need to research issues of ideology, power and inequality and that second/additional language teaching... can and should serve as a vehicle for institutional change and the promotion of social justice” (p. 88). How can we use social media in ways that may support this goal of Critical CALL? One possibility is to encourage students to come out of information cocoons and have open dialogue with everyone, regardless of their diverse beliefs, needs, and goals. My proposal is to design pedagogical activities by incorporating social media that aim for serendipity—chance encounters among conflicting ideas and worldviews. In such activities, the teacher provides what Sharpe (2006) described as *contingent scaffolding*, which is responsive to current circumstances and the complex interactions between individuals and their environments. Dix (2016) illustrated this kind of scaffolding by documenting how teachers constantly adjust their curricular tasks to accommodate students’ learning and developmental needs.

My proposal for a pedagogy of serendipity is based on dialogism and its principal goal is to achieve hermeneutical understandings of pressing social and political issues. Dialogism is one of the five major theoretical traditions that have historically influenced language studies. The other four are structuralism, constructivism, social constructionism, and poststructuralism (Warschauer & Grimes, 2007). According to dialogism, texts/artifacts are “a multivocal means of mediation between conversants,” the author/speaker works in ways of “appropriation and remixing of utterances in interaction,”

and the audience is a conversant with the author/speaker (Warschauer & Grimes, 2007, p. 3). To illustrate this theoretical tradition, I turn to Mikhail Bakhtin's works and discuss two of his central concepts—polyphony and surplus of seeing—in support of my proposal for a pedagogy of serendipity.

Bakhtin and Critical CALL

To conceptualize pedagogical uses of social media in order to teach open dialogue necessary for democracy and social justice, I find Bakhtin's notion of dialogue very helpful. At the heart of his thought on dialogue is "a plurality of contending and mutually qualifying social voices, with no possibility of a decisive resolution into a monologic truth" (Abrams & Harpham, 2005, p. 64). Bakhtin contrasted the novels of Leo Tolstoy to those of Fyodor Dostoevsky. He called the former monologic because the voices of their characters are subordinate to the authoritative and controlling voice of the author. In contrast, Dostoevsky's novels are dialogic because his characters are free to speak with independent voices, which create a polyphony of multiple valid voices. Through this contrast, Bakhtin shows that our existence is a continuous dialogue with self and other. It requires an active understanding, which assimilates the word of a speaker and establishes a complex series of interrelationships with the word. In such dialogic encounters, the speaker takes

an orientation toward a specific conceptual horizon, toward the specific world of the listener; it introduces totally new elements into his [*sic*] discourse; it is in this way, after all, that various different points of view, conceptual horizons, systems for providing expressive accents, various social "languages" come to interact with one another. (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 282)

As this quotation suggests, Bakhtin's dialogism is a rich and complex theory of social existence and understanding. A detailed elucidation is clearly beyond the scope of this article (for a lengthy analysis, see Holquist, 2002). In brief, Bakhtin shows us the unfinalizability of ideas and multitude of voices in our dialogical encounters with the other. His conceptualization of dialogue presupposes the difference, independence, and multitude of ideas (Nikulin, 1998).

Bakhtin's notion of polyphony highlights the multiplicity of voice in dialogue. In the study of music, polyphony refers to "any music in which two or more tones sound simultaneously; ... [these] two or more simultaneous melodic lines are perceived as independent even though they are related" ("polyphony," 2017, para. 1). For Bakhtin, polyphony is a metaphor for "the simultaneously present and consecutively uttered plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousness" (Nikulin, 1998, p. 382). What Bakhtin most likely meant by polyphony is that the very greatest writers such as Dostoevsky permit their "characters to have the status of an 'I' standing over against

the claims of [their] own authorial other” (Holquist, 2002, p. 34). In contrast, some authors treat their characters in the same way scientists exploit rats in their laboratory. Therefore, social media are likely to spread monologic truths until and unless users engage in dialogue with each other in a polyphonic space. Dialogue is not meant to publicize what is known to self. On the contrary, through dialogues “one may find one’s very personal truth for the first time” (Friedrich, 1997, p. 358). Hence, the dialogic truth emerges from multiple individuals with their differing voices interacting together.

Another Bakhtinian concept helpful for understanding his dialogism is *surplus of seeing*. Broadly speaking, it suggests that every individual’s place in the world is unique and irreplaceable because it enables him/her to see something that others cannot see from their place. In Bakhtin’s own words:

For at each given moment, regardless of the position and the proximity to me of this other human being whom I am contemplating, I shall always see and know something that he, from his place outside and over against me, cannot see himself: parts of his body that are inaccessible to his own gaze (his head, his face and its expression), the world behind his back, and a whole series of object and relations, which in any of our mutual relations are accessible to me but not to him. As we gaze at each other, two different worlds are reflected in the pupils of our eyes. (Bakhtin, 1990, pp. 22–23)

Here, Bakhtin demonstrates an important relationship between self and other. For example, when two persons face each other, one can see what is behind the other person, which the other cannot see. None of these individuals is able to see the whole, although each of them has a *surplus of seeing*. By adding the surplus given to both of them, they may be “able to ‘conceive’ or construct a whole out of the different situations [they] are in together” (Holquist, 2002, p. 36). Thus, Bakhtin takes a radical approach to outsidedness, which points to the confrontation of personal truths because our truth may be verified only by reference to that of others. By adding the surplus of seeing that each person has, partners of a dialogue may be better able to realize the meanings of their utterance. In this sense, plurality of voices is a necessary condition for understanding meanings that emerge from a dialogue.

It follows from this brief discussion that Bakhtin’s dialogism holds important implications for understanding how social actors communicate with each other using a variety of media. If we look at social media use through the lens of Bakhtin’s (1984, 1990) polyphonic dialogue, then media users need to have their own independent voices that are not suppressed by the authoritarian voice of the other. An independent voice may not contain truth as an individual property. However, the point I am trying to make is that our understanding of truth and ethical praxis for justice and fairness are contingent and best realized through the meeting of self and other. Thus, Sunstein’s architecture of

serendipity can flourish only in a polyphonic space where everyone is free—like Dostoevsky’s characters—to speak with their independent voice while engaging with the utterances and worldviews of the other.

On a practical pedagogical level, a polyphonic space on social media will challenge an oft-cited benefit of social media use, i.e., personalized learning. While the idea of personalization seems to be innocent and helpful for learners, the vast majority of literature on personalized learning ignores the need to push students beyond their comfort zone. In the name of tailoring instruction to “the specific interests of different learners” (Dede, 2016, p. 108), efforts to personalize learning end up entertaining students. Such an entertainment approach to teaching disregards the fact that what some students like to do on social media may not be pedagogically or socio-politically desirable. As educators, we need to ensure that students do not just pursue their whims and interests, and bypass difficult questions about justice and equity. Drawing upon Bakhtin’s works, Hall, Vitanova, and Marchenkova (2005) wrote that learning languages “does not mean accumulating decontextualized forms or structures but rather entering into ways of communicating that are defined by specific economic, political, and historical forces” (p. 3). To support these “ways of communicating,” a dialogic approach to pedagogy may prepare students for serendipitous encounter with like-minded “friends” as well as with those having radically different perspectives.

Contingent Scaffolding for a Pedagogy of Serendipity

There are multiple possibilities for taking a dialogic approach to teaching language by utilizing social media. One possibility that I have proposed in this article is to design a pedagogy of serendipity. The idea of serendipity suggests that crucial understandings often emerge from unanticipated “bumps” in the real world. Taking serendipity as a pedagogical principle is important because teaching is a complex practice highly sensitive to human relationships and contextual demands. Good teaching is, to a great extent, about making normative distinction between what is appropriate and what is less appropriate for students (van Manen, 1999). This view of teaching gives ethical responsibility to the teacher, who makes practical decisions based on his or her wisdom. The teacher recognizes that language learning takes place in complex systems and is always emergent and interconnected with temporal and spatial environments (Larsen-Freeman, 2018).

Therefore, I recommend that the teacher provide contingent scaffolding to students in pedagogical activities that invite serendipitous encounters between conflicting ideas and data. For example, the language teacher may want to ask students to find evidence using social media to support their claim or to illustrate a contrast between two concepts or products. The teacher may

also ask students to find online sources that they do not usually visit. In this way, students can locate alternative viewpoints, which will be beneficial, for example, in the rebuttal section of argumentative writing. Thus, students may learn to use social media to have dialogues not only with like-minded individuals and ideas, but also with a wider community with diverse and conflicting viewpoints. Of course, knowing that there are opposing points of view should not be the end goal. The next step should be to support students to critically evaluate various perspectives and make informed decisions about issues that impact all of our personal, academic, social, and political lives. Once again, the educator's practical wisdom, based on an in-depth study and knowledge of his/her own students and the environment, is necessary to design pedagogical activities that facilitate students' ability and disposition to develop such criticality.

An illustrative example of this kind of pedagogy is Hawkins' (2014) *Stories Without Borders* project. This project was designed for youth English-language learners in 6 sites located in China, India, the United States, and Uganda. In addition to increasing English language and literacy skills of these students, an important goal of the project was to engage them in electronic communications "to increase awareness and understanding of global others and of themselves as global citizens" (Hawkins, 2014, p. 99). In this project, the participants collaborated with peers in their own site, created digital stories, and uploaded them to the project website. They also watched the digital stories of other groups, engaged in facilitated conversations, and posted comments and asked questions via a chatroom on the website. One of the lessons learned from this multimodal e-communication project is that youth need to engage in this kind of project for their situated social learning. This is important "not only to creatively negotiate, portray, and construct meanings of self and others, but to move further to agentively investigate domains and scales of difference, and the impact of these on their and others' lives" (Hawkins, 2014, p. 109). Thus, pedagogical innovation utilizing social media may support educators' ethical mandate to foster just and equitable social relations.

Conclusion

A lot has changed since the time of Barber's contemplation of technology and the future of democracy. We have witnessed unprecedented technological advancements. Now we can hardly imagine a classroom without some forms of digital technology. Perhaps we can never finish teaching a lesson without asking students to turn away from their smartphones. This technological revolution has its dark side, too. With unbelievable ease of self-publishing online, we have now entered an era of what some have described as "alternative

facts.” The tremendous volume and speed of sharing user-generated materials make it very difficult to differentiate the truth and falsehood. Using social media to spread hatred, suppress dissent, and promote anti-democratic practices has become a global phenomenon. The authoritarian President Rodrigo Duterte’s “keyboard army” in the Philippines is a noteworthy example. Every day, hundreds of thousands of supporters—both paid and unpaid—take to social media to portray Duterte as a good leader and to create an illusion of his widespread support (Williams, 2017). In many forms, social media are posing a dangerous threat to democracy and social justice. Taking a dialogical approach to pedagogy and social media is more urgent than ever. Dialogue is one of the few options available to verify facts and establish “truth” in this age of social media.

As discussed above, Bakhtin’s dialogism suggests that meaning/understanding comes about “as a result of the relation between two bodies occupying *simultaneous but different* space, where bodies may be thought of as ranging from the immediacy of our physical bodies, to political bodies and to bodies of ideas” (Holquist, 2002, p. 21). A strong democracy will not flourish if we continue to entertain student-citizens in the name of personalization and let them spin information cocoons. Uncritical focus on personalization will likely turn them into a group of narcissists sitting in echo chambers and donating free labor to media corporations. As critical educators, we need to design pedagogical activities in such ways that students will “be exposed to materials that they would not have chosen in advance” (Sunstein, 2017, p. 6). This kind of pedagogical design is important because “unplanned, unanticipated encounters are central to democracy” (Sunstein, 2017, p. 6). For a justice-oriented democratic future, we need to scaffold students to create shared public spaces, not information cocoons. In this effort, social media can be poison or remedy.

About the Author

Sardar M. Anwaruddin received his PhD from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto. In 2018, he completed his two-year SSHRC postdoctoral fellowship at St. Francis Xavier University in Nova Scotia. Currently he is teaching in the English Department of Glendon College at York University. His articles have appeared in journals such as *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, *Professional Development in Education*, *Discourse*, *Reflective Practice*, *Teaching in Higher Education*, *Educational Studies*, *Curriculum Inquiry*, *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, *International Journal of Research and Method in Education*, and *The Brazilian Journal of Applied Linguistics*. His recent edited book is *Knowledge Mobilization in TESOL: Connecting Research and Practice* (2019, Brill).

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