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It Started With Iced Cappuccino: Social Media and Social Good

FAIR TRADE



Abstract

Students are spending increasing amounts of time using technology, particularly computers (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2010). As students use search engines and Internet tools, they are able to access information about myriad topics (Fieldhouse & Nicholas, 2008). Educators are in a position to develop a culture of digital learning (Søby, 2008) in their classrooms and also to support students as they explore their interconnectedness with others around the globe (Herrera, 2012). Through the use of online communities, educators can guide students in connecting with others locally and globally who share common interests or support common causes. Participation in such online communities can promote further discussion that may help young people understand their online connections in a global context (Schreyer, 2012). Through the use of technology and social media, a group of seventh grade students investigated a local observation regarding fair trade practices and connected with others from around the world based on the issue. The use of social media allowed the students to better understand and contribute to the social good.

Keywords: social media, social good, global issues, interconnectedness, transnationalism

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The seventh grade students restlessly glanced out the window at the dreary, gray sky. This fall day was particularly gloomy, and the students were lethargic and uninterested in my attempts to engage them in a mini-lesson on expository text. One seventh grader commented that if she could have an iced cappuccino delivered to the classroom, perhaps her focus would improve. This comment led me to take a quick class poll to determine the students' favored pick-me-up beverages and preferred coffee shop orders, with the intention of redirecting the lesson back to the original topic immediately following the poll. However, a few students wanted to share tangential stories, such as their observations and experiences with iced coffee drinks and the number of Starbucks locations they have visited. As the discussion wrapped up and as I was preparing to once again redirect the class, a student asked me what the term *fair trade* meant. This question sparked an idea for integrating technology into my planned lesson and resulted in an unanticipated exploration of a global issue.

Technology and Students

Today's students are spending more of their time engaging with various forms of media, with the results of one recent study suggesting that children between the ages of 8 and 18 spend on average seven and a half hours per day using media, particularly computers (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2010). According to Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, and Leu (2008), "the Internet is quickly becoming this generation's defining technology for literacy" (p. 4). New technologies, such as social media, that can be incorporated into classrooms are spread via the Internet. Technology is closely related to each student's ability to achieve educational power (Warschauer & Ware, 2008). It is imperative that educators use technology to support students not only as part of literacy

development but also to help students make connections with others in the world.

While educators may recognize the value of incorporating technology into the classroom, many may struggle to identify ways to use technology to extend students' thinking, rather than as an add-on to a lesson. Fieldhouse and Nicholas (2008) conceptualize digital literacy as the ability to use search engines and other related Internet tools; the skills associated with digital literacy can further be viewed as a precondition for encouraging student-centered learning. However, digital literacy skills alone do not guarantee that students will be able to interact successfully in digital environments. Students must also be able to apply critical thinking skills to judge the reliability and quality of information they encounter because students may encounter misinformation as they incorporate online information into their understanding of a topic (Fieldhouse & Nicholas, 2008).

To support students' effective use of technology, educators should try to "develop a digital learning culture" in the classroom (Søby, 2008, p. 138). In many cases, students and teachers both use technology at home in ways that are not necessarily reflected in school curricula (Søby, 2008). Additionally, students interact with texts through the various technologies of the time, which leads to literacy development taking place through "social and cultural factors" (Hagood, 2008, p. 532). This means that social and cultural practices, such as students' use of social media outside of school, can contribute to literacy development and can be considered part of students' literacy practices. Educators must recognize that students have at their fingertips access not only to information but to other cultures, groups, and individuals around the world through the use of technology. A challenge for teachers is to encourage students to explore this interconnectedness (Herrera, 2012) and to use technology to better understand their global community.

Online Communities, Discourse, and Identity

Through the use of digital tools, individuals are able to create identities (Gee, 2011) and to present those identities as representations of themselves to others in society (Martin, 2008). In online spaces, youth are able to participate in affinity groups (Duncan & Hayes, 2012; Gee, 2004) or communities that may promote discussions that aid students in understanding online interconnectedness in a global context (Schreyer, 2012). In this sense, technology can lead to "the creation of virtual, transnational youth communities" (Schreyer, 2012, p. 61). When young people join online communities, they are in a position to make connections with individuals in other countries.

Previous definitions of transnationalism refer to an individual who has moved across a national border while keeping ties with a home country (Hornberger, 2007); more recent definitions, however, conceptualize transnationalism as contact taking place among individuals from different nations, even if those individuals do not leave their home countries (Vertovec, 2009).

When students participate in online communities and engage in transnational discourse, they have the opportunity to connect with members of different nations and cultures while discussing a common area of interest. This is a powerful learning tool that educators can use not only to foster students' literacy practices but also to support students' understanding of and appreciation for multiple, diverse perspectives and identification of global perspectives related to issues that go beyond one nation or group.

Based upon the latter definition of transnationalism, adolescents who participate in online communities that include individuals from other nations are engaging in transnational literacy practices. Although membership in an online community does not guarantee that adolescents will consider the meaning of transnationalism, participation in online communities can promote further discussion that can help young people understand their online connections in a global context (Schreyer, 2012). Networked information has permeated different areas of daily living (Bawden, 2008), which means that students may encounter such information both at home and at school. For students, this means that information on myriad topics can be accessed through available technology. Students can investigate topics of interest to them while in the classroom or in other locations. For teachers, it is important to realize the sheer mass of information that may bombard students; teachers can help students think critically about such information and become informed consumers of information. Additionally, teachers can harness the power of the availability of this information to guide students in exploring topics that have real-world meaning and that transcend the classroom setting.

Learning in online spaces highlights the potential for students to have "the opportunity to engage in transnational dialogues happening online" (Schreyer, 2012, p. 63). As individuals use technology to engage in discourse in virtual environments, they are able to connect with others around the globe who share common interests or support the same causes (Schreyer, 2012). Such online discourse takes place in "transnational social spaces" that allow members "to exist within their own nation" while simultaneously "connecting with individuals from other nations" (Schreyer, 2012, p. 64). According to Gee (2004), affinity spaces primarily are based on a common shared interest, rather than on features such as race or gender. Affinity spaces can be

physical locations or virtual locations where individuals interact with one another based on a shared interest (Duncan & Hayes, 2012). Affinity spaces are further characterized as places where novices and experts share a common space within which there are different ways to participate and different paths to achieving status (Gee, 2004).

Literate practices within affinity groups have meanings specific to members of the group; words, symbols, images, and so forth carry situated meanings (Gee, 2007). Interaction in affinity groups has the potential to support learning through interactions with experts in the group and through exposure to diverse perspectives related to a shared topic of interest. Gee's (2011) discussion of Discourse further explains the learning that may take place in affinity groups. According to Gee, "Discourses are always language *plus* 'other stuff'... Discourses are about being different 'kinds of people'" (p. 34). Whether or not students consciously understand the elements of Discourse, they are able to pick up on the ways in which members of a certain group dress and talk, the activities they participate in, the attitudes they hold, and so on. Involvement in various Discourses relates to students' identities. As Gee mentions, situated identity involves "the 'kind of person' one is seeking to be and enact here and now" (2011, p. 30). When students participate in online communities and engage in transnational discourse, they have the opportunity to connect with members of different nations and cultures while discussing a common area of interest. This is a powerful learning tool that educators can use not only to foster students' literacy practices but also to support students' understanding of and appreciation for multiple, diverse perspectives and identification of global perspectives related to issues that go beyond one nation or group.

Social Media and the Social Good in Seventh Grade

As a middle school teacher, I recognize that online communities can support student learning and foster an appreciation of other regions of the world. During one particular semester, I wracked my brain over the course of several weeks trying to identify a way that I could use online communities to inspire my students to read expository text and to engage in expository writing. At the time, I did not think about also using technology as a way for my students to explore and advocate for critical issues, although this became an unanticipated outcome of my students' technology use. After fruitless brainstorming sessions, I had all but given up on using online communities until that conversation about iced cappuccino and fair trade with my seventh grade students guided our class down an unexpected path.

The student who asked about fair trade saw this term in a coffee shop and did not know how to interpret it. I considered simply explaining the phrase so that the planned lesson could resume. Additionally, the explanation would allow me to review the concept of multiple meaning words and to challenge students to think of possible definitions that may apply, since many of the students assumed that "trade" in this case referred to a simple swap. However, my mind moved once more to the idea of incorporating technology

into the classroom, and I decided to have students explore the issue themselves. In the remaining minutes of the class period, the seventh graders conducted Internet searches on the classroom computers to find information about the phrase "fair trade." Not surprisingly, different groups of students found different explanations and viewpoints related to the term. I assured the students that we would continue our investigation of the phrase during the next day's class, and that afternoon I began planning ways to have students use the Internet to locate and read information about fair trade practices. I also decided to have students work with partners to write about fair trade practices and products and perhaps even advocate for fair trade practices, based on the information they located online.

The next day, I was excited to use the Internet to have students engage in expository reading and writing related to fair trade. While I was explaining this new assignment to my class, one student raised her hand and shared with the class that she used #fairtrade on Twitter the previous evening to see what was trending in relation to the phrase. At the time, I had never used Twitter and was only minimally familiar with the "hashtag" lingo. My kneejerk reaction was to move the conversation away from social media, particularly because its use during the school day was banned on my campus. Instead, though, I thought about the fact that today's learners are different from those of previous generations and require different instructional methods and support to succeed (Burke, 2009). Social media is a digital tool used by many middle school students, including those in my classroom, and I wanted to bring this tool into my classroom to support students' literacy practices.

Knowing that students spend considerable amounts of time engaging with technology (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2010), I wanted to incorporate technology into this lesson to interest students and to support literacy development. My initial negative reaction to the use of social media to explore fair trade practices underscores the extent to which technology use at home is not necessarily part of the school curricula; by deciding to allow social media into the lesson, I tried to establish a "digital learning culture" (Søby, 2008, p. 138) in my classroom. The use of social media provided an opportunity for my students to explore their interconnectedness with others around the globe and to realize that fair trade is a topic that is not restricted to a particular group, organization, or country.

In thinking about the fair trade investigation, I reflected on the concept of critical pedagogy and on problem posing education, which involves "interactive participation and critical inquiry" and expands the curriculum to reflect students' lives (Wink, 2011, p. 75). Problem posing education encourages creativity and builds a sense of community; it "always ends with action" (Wink, 2011, p. 151). Problem posing tied in with my idea to have students not only read and write about fair trade practices but also to take a stand as advocates based on the knowledge they would gain through their online investigations. In addition, by having students advocate for an issue of interest, the seventh graders were able to use digital tools (e.g., Twitter) to create identities (e.g., supporter of fair trade practices) and to present those representations to others (e.g., tweeting in support of fair trade practices) within the local community and beyond (Gee, 2011; Martin, 2008).



Figure 1. Example of TweetChat using #fairtrade.
 Note: This is an example of Tweets that display in TweetChat when the hashtag “fair trade” is used to search Twitter.

While I could not allow my students to log on to their personal Twitter accounts since doing so would be in violation of school policy, I did discover TweetChat (www.tweetchat.com) and obtained permission to project this website on my SMART Board during class. The website allows a user to enter a word or phrase (e.g., fair trade) in a search box and then displays Tweets that have included that word or phrase as a hashtag. Some of the Tweets we viewed were authored by individuals, while others were posted by businesses and nonprofit organizations. An example of a TweetChat related to fair trade is presented in Figure 1.

As we read through the Tweets together, my students and I began to notice that some of the Tweets were written in languages other than English and/or referenced other countries. One student astutely observed, “Fair trade is not about Starbucks—it’s about people’s lives.” This seemingly simple online tool demonstrated over the course of a few minutes how technology connects us to one another and can be used to explore global issues. The use of TweetChat allowed me to guide my students in identifying companies and nonprofit organizations around the world that were concerned with fair trade products and practices. Once my students identified the names of these companies, they visited websites and read more about company practices. A list of websites students visited is presented in Table 1.

Several students commented that they would ask their parents to look for the fair trade symbol when shopping, and others made note of websites that sell fair trade products, saying they wanted to buy birthday presents for friends and family from those sites. Some students advocated for fair trade practices through

Table 1
 Examples of Fair Trade Websites Students Visited in Class

Website	Organization/Business	Country of Origin
www.european-fair-trade-association.org	European Fair Trade Association	The Netherlands
www.fairbusiness-alliance.com	Fair Business Alliance, Ltd.	Scotland
www.fairtrade.ca	Fairtrade Canada	Canada
www.fairtrade.net	Fairtrade International	Germany
www.fairtrade-advocacy.org	Fair Trade Advocacy Office	Belgium
www.fairtradefederation.org	Fair Trade Federation	United States
www.fairtrademag.com	Fair Trade Magazine	unknown
www.fairtraderesource.org	Fair Trade Resource Network	United States
www.fairtradetownsusa.org	Fair Trade Towns USA	United States
www.fairtradeusa.org	Fair Trade USA	United States
www.globalexchange.org/fairtrade/faq	Global Exchange	United States
www.mcc.ca/fair-trade/	Manitoba Council for International Cooperation	Canada
https://www.oxfam.org.au/explore/trade/	Oxfam Australia	Australia
www.wfto.com	World Fair Trade Organization	The Netherlands

Note: These websites are examples of the ones students located through Twitter and through Internet searches.

visual representations they created in class (see Figure 2) and through their social media postings. My students continued to conduct Internet searches to learn more about fair trade, but the incorporation of social media had the greatest impact in helping the seventh graders understand that issues they notice in their local community, such as the fair trade sign in a coffee shop, may be issues that are discussed globally and that are of concern to individuals in different countries. Through the use of social media, students saw a transnational online community related to fair trade and located online affinity groups dedicated to the promotion of fair trade practices.

By reading the Tweets related to fair trade, my students were able to encounter the perspectives of others, both locally and internationally. After learning more about fair trade, students who used Twitter outside of school reported that they decided to Tweet in support of fair trade practices; social media enabled them to communicate their ideas and beliefs with others. Through the use of social media, in conjunction with Internet searches, I was able to guide students in their use of technology as a means to investigate and understand the world beyond the local community in which they live. Once the students saw the variety of social media posts related to fair trade, they better understood that they are global citizens who can connect with others about common concerns and interests. These seventh graders went from noticing a sign in a local coffee shop to discovering that fair trade practices are an issue discussed by individuals, organizations, and companies across different continents. Social media provided a way for my students to understand and contribute to the social good. During the course of our class investigation, students read countless websites about fair trade and also found online videos to watch about the topic. Through social media, students were

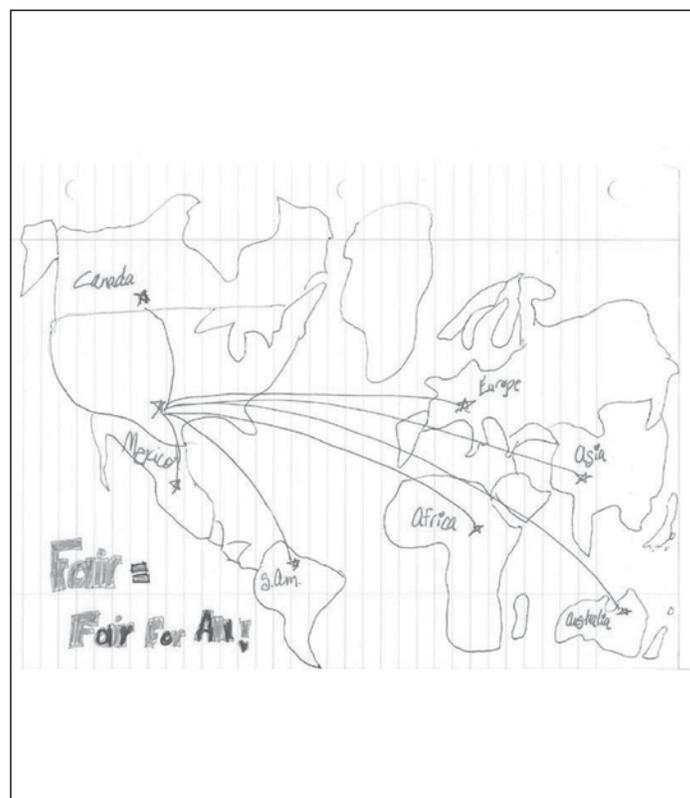


Figure 2. Example of a student's visual representation of fair trade.

able to read about fair trade practices and also write and share their own thoughts about the topic. Examples of fair trade videos students located are presented in Table 2. Other texts related to fair trade that students read are presented in Table 3.

Table 2
Examples of Fair Trade Online Videos Students Located

Website	Video Title
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mbFBP35rOcw	Fairtrade Cotton: Moral Fibre
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mk9b3jbJroM	Fair Trade Chocolate
http://www.fairtrademag.com/about-fair-trade/	Fair Trade: Every Purchase Matters
http://vimeo.com/33182794	MCIC Fair Trade Video
http://www.fairtrademag.com/what-fair-trade-is/	The Skoll World Forum: Uncommon Heroes

Note: These videos are examples of the ones students located through Internet searches.

Table 3
Other Texts About Fair Trade that Students Read

Title	Author
<i>Clothes: From Fur to Fair Trade</i>	Liz Miles
<i>Fair Trade</i>	Jilly Hunt
<i>Issues of the World: Fair Trade?</i>	Adrian Cooper
<i>Making Good Choices About Fair Trade</i>	Paula Johanson
<i>Think Fair Trade First!</i>	Ingrid Hess

Final Thoughts

The use of social media facilitated a lively adventure into online spaces to not only promote my students' reading and writing but also to allow them to understand their ability to advocate for a cause they believe in and to connect with others who share that cause. While my students never physically left our rural community, the use of online spaces and social media allowed them to connect with others and to view themselves as global citizens. Additionally, through their investigation of fair trade practices using social media and technology, students were able to explore their interconnectedness with others and to project their own identities and beliefs. In order for students to learn, live, and thrive in the "global village" (Wink, 2011, p. 179), they must be able to innovate and apply creative thought in new ways. A comment about iced cappuccino provided the catalyst for guiding my class through an investigation of a global issue using technology and social media. Technology allowed my students to connect a local issue to a global one and to view their place in the global village.

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