What immigrant students can teach us about new media literacy

Understanding how immigrant students use digital media outside of school could help develop digitally connected forms of pedagogy in schools.

In recent years, there has been increasing interest in understanding how young people are incorporating digital media into their everyday lives and the kinds of literacy learning and socialization that occur when using new media. At the same time, there is growing momentum to improve students’ digital learning and 21st-century skills in diverse educational settings. However, in the United States, relatively little educational research and innovation in new media literacy has dealt with the cultural practices of young people who come from immigrant families. This is despite the fact that foreign-born children and those born in the United States to immigrant parents are a large and growing segment of the student population. Although digital media and the Internet are seen as global technologies that provide social and information linkages across geographical space, we’ve often overlooked the fact that youth who have experienced mobility across countries may be most inclined to use new media to create such social and information linkages.

My research and that of others offer evidence that many adolescents of immigrant backgrounds are developing language, literacy, and social skills across national borders as they use social media and online tools to interact with people and information sources in different communities across their countries of origin and settlement. These transnational digital practices have the potential to serve students well in schools if they’re recognized and leveraged to promote new media literacy for a global age.

Digitally connected learning and culturally responsive pedagogy

Research has demonstrated how innovative and productive forms of learning can occur as youth engage in friendship- and interest-driven practices with digital media (Ito et al., 2010). Many adolescents use social media tools to maintain and extend particular peer relationships and social networks that they value in their offline lives. Adolescents are also engaging in interest-driven practices, such as online gaming, music, fan fiction, and fan art, by connecting with peers and adults in different places who share their passion and mentor each other in online communities. This research has led some scholars to advocate “connected learning” (http://connectedlearning.tv/what-is-connected-learning) to harness different support structures across online and offline spaces and to do so across institutional boundaries to promote more robust and personalized learning. The idea is to draw from the power of digital networks to connect multiple sets of resources across school, home, and community.

Indeed, scholars who embrace sociocultural perspectives in learning have encouraged recognizing how the home-based and community experiences of immigrant students provide unique cultural knowledge and linguistic
resources. Studies have shown that when school learning connects to students’ cultures, native languages, identities, and communities, we see gains in both academic engagement and achievement (Gutiérrez, Morales, & Martinez, 2009). Hence, understanding the role of digital media in immigrant students’ learning experiences outside of school may help us develop digitally connected forms of pedagogy that are also culturally responsive.

**Online practices of immigrant youth**

In my research with immigrant students, I’ve tried to understand how they use digital media to cultivate diverse sets of social, language, and information resources. In a study, my research team surveyed 262 students and interviewed 36 students at an ethnically diverse Midwestern high school where over 50 different languages were spoken by students in their homes (Lam & Rosario-Ramos, 2009). Focusing on students who emigrated to the U.S. in their early childhood to mid-adolescence, we found that a large majority (72%) used the Internet to communicate with people across countries, particularly with peers and family in the U.S. and in the students’ countries of origin. Although students who emigrated later in their childhood were more likely to use digital media to network with people across countries, almost 47% of students who came to the U.S. when they were under the age of 6 reported communicating online with people in their country of origin. Our student interviews revealed that they used multiple languages in their online activities as they accessed information and managed diverse sets of interpersonal relationships across geographical boundaries. We also found that most students obtained news from both U.S. web sites and web sites based in their native countries or other parts of the world. Such exposure to a plurality of news and information sources seemed to have broadened and diversified the youths’ perspectives on current events and issues. For example, some students described how reading news from other countries expanded their scope and choice of information; some also described the contrasting perspectives reflected in the different sources of news that they accessed online.

Subsequently, I’ve extended this research by conducting an ethnographic study to develop more in-depth and contextualized understanding of how youth develop social and informational networks across countries. I focused on the Chinese immigrant community for this study because of my familiarity with a number of languages and dialects spoken in this population. By closely studying seven youths’ practices with digital media in their home and community settings, I learned how the youth cultivate and leverage their online networks for learning.

As I reported in several articles (Lam, 2009a; Lam, 2009b; Lam, 2012, in review), the youth in the study showed dexterity of language use as they communicated with different groups of people in the U.S. and China. For example, Kaiyee (pseudonym), a 16-year-old who had lived in the U.S. for...
Youth who have experienced mobility across countries may be most inclined to use new media to create such social and information linkages.

two years, used instant messaging and blogs to communicate with three main networks: a) a local network of peers from school and youth groups in the Chinese community that used a combination of Mandarin and Cantonese, along with English, to interact and share information; b) an online network of Asian-American youth who communicated by using both standard English and hip-hop English and with whom Kaiyee was acquiring a vernacular style of English to interact with her American peers; and c) a transnational network of her childhood peers, relatives, and online friends in China. In this transnational network, Kaiyee and her contacts used both Mandarin and the Shanghai dialect. The content of their exchanges included discussions of their schooling and work situations and Shanghai’s economic development. In these and other online practices, Kaiyee was developing and maintaining ties with quite different communities as she acquired and displayed multiple linguistic and social resources.

Some of the youth also navigated web sites and online networks across the U.S. and China to participate in a domain of interest, which ranged from Japanese anime and manga (graphic novels), to digital art design and philosophy forums. For example, one 11th-grade student who emigrated to the U.S. at age nine accessed various literary genres of anime (e.g., synopses, reviews, discussions, fan-produced art, and videos) on multiple web sites serviced in the U.S. and China. Because of the global nature of the anime fandom and industry and cultural differences across geographical regions, the use of multiple languages allowed the youth to access both an overlapping and distinct range of information, perspectives, and media content across countries and, thereby, expanded the ways in which they participated in this popular culture.

Other researchers who conducted case studies with immigrant youth of Colombian, Indian, Korean, Mexican, and Trinidadian heritage have similarly shown their use of instant messaging, online journals, and social networking sites. These youth composed personal profiles and narrative texts that target different audiences and contain references to the students’ social relations and experiences in both the U.S. and their native countries (McGinnis, Goodstein-Stolzenberg, & Saliani, 2007; McLean, 2010; Sánchez & Salazar, 2012; Yi, 2009). Through these digital practices, the youth communicated using multiple language forms and media while negotiating varying social and cultural contexts and communities.

**Multiple affiliations and digital cultural capital**

These studies show that we need a broadened understanding of how immigrant youth may tap into diverse linguistic and cultural communities across national borders for learning. Understanding how these young people access resources could lead us to reconsider how our educational practices could enhance their language and literacy development. How could we re-envision education that recognizes their affiliations with diverse communities and promotes their ability to draw from the social and digital resources in these communities for their learning? This question is especially pertinent among youth whose experiences and perspectives include multiple identifications across countries, although these experiences and perspectives often go unacknowledged in our schools. Australian educational scholar Lo Bianco (2000, p. 101) noted that, “Like spoken language, diversity in the plural literacy practices of minority children is often relegated to the margins of their lives. Yet, they have within them the power to open up new intellectual worlds which are, at the moment, linguistically and intellectually closed to us.”

The students’ experiences demonstrate that multilingualism can be used productively through digital media to facilitate human interactions, construct social ties across geographical boundaries and seek ideas and information from various sources. In many cases, the students’ social and informational networks have extended opportunities for them to develop their language skills and enabled them to participate in social and interest-based communities that stretch beyond their physical locality. In educational research, the notion of cultural capital has been used to refer to the skills and dispositions of children of middle- and upper-class families, which helps them gain advantages in schools and other institutions that privilege particular verbal skills and social dispositions (Lareau, 2003). However, immigrant youth have digital cultural capital that schools often overlook but could be well-suited for a global society and information age. The linguistic skills, social ties, informational sources, and perspectives that the youth develop through their digital networks with diverse geographical communities are forms of cultural capital that could help them navigate an interdependent and fast-changing world. By recognizing and leveraging these resources of immigrant youth in our educational practices, we may not only build on their prior experiences and digital skills but also expand the resources for learning in the classroom as a whole.

**Incorporating digital assets of immigrant students**

We obviously need more research to help us better understand the digital practices of immigrant youth — how much they participate in cross-border digital practices and how different social and demographic variables affect levels and types of engagement. We could design ways to leverage their social networks and multilingual skills as intellectual resources for approaching problems from multiple perspectives or vantage points. One approach might
involve a transnational framing of relevant curriculum topics (e.g., the global economy, immigration, environmental health) that would allow students to use their skills in multiple languages to learn about these issues from various local, national, and transnational points of view. We could ask students to gather perspectives on how these issues affect the diverse local communities with which they’re affiliated; how these issues are represented in U.S. media; and how they’re portrayed in the news and online media in the students’ countries of origin and perceived through the experience of their peers or relatives in those countries. In so doing, we may foster students’ ability to move across different media platforms, social networks, and languages in the process of learning.

In a project funded by the McCormick Foundation of Chicago, I’m working with high school teachers and colleagues at the School of Education and Social Policy and Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University to design and study a media production curriculum that is civically oriented and focuses on immigrant communities. The goal of the curriculum is to teach immigrant students and their high school classmates multimedia storytelling for effective civic participation. The 10-week social studies curriculum focuses on how immigration policy affects young people, particularly as the project occurs during the presidential election campaign. A major assignment that students undertake is to create a video documentary that analyzes immigration policy and how it affects the experiences of people in their community. The students share their policy analyses, interviews with community members, in-progress narratives, and the final documentary online with peers to disseminate their ideas and gather feedback on the effectiveness of their presentation. The curriculum is aligned to state and national standards on social studies research and writing, civics, language arts, and new media and technological literacy. It also aims to leverage students’ language skills, digital networks, and information resources in the process of learning.

For example, since most students in the class are children of immigrants who speak another language in their homes, we encourage students to use their native or heritage language to interview people in their community who are recent immigrants. We communicate to them that multilingual skills are an important asset to reporters, researchers, and media producers. Students also use their online networks to recruit people for interviews. If they have peers or relatives who live in or have moved back to an immigrant-sending country, students can do online interviews to gather their ideas and experiences about the story they’re working on. In conducting research for the policy issue they’re investigating, students gather and analyze documents from policy think tanks, government bureaus, and diverse media sources. Students are expected to analyze policy arguments from various mainstream and nonmainstream sources, including broadcast and online media that serve immigrant and ethnic communities. By using blogs and social networking sites, students gather feedback and critiques from peers on stories that they develop. This curriculum is just one way to envision how we could draw from the digital assets of immigrant students in teaching and learning.

References


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