



Teaching in global collaborations: Navigating challenging conversations through cosmopolitan activity



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HIGHLIGHTS

- A central challenge of global collaborations involves expressing conflicting ideas.
- Bringing conflicting ideas into dialogue resulted in challenging conversations.
- Teachers found engaging in and facilitating challenging conversations difficult.
- Digital tools like remixed video mediated challenging conversations ethically.
- Teachers created conditions and contexts for ethical communicative practices.

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ABSTRACT

This article examines teachers' participation in a global collaboration, an educational partnership connecting educators and students online. A challenge that emerged involved how to engage in and facilitate online interactions that made manifest participants' conflicting beliefs and opinions, what I refer to as challenging conversations. To mediate challenging conversations, teachers experimented with new digital tools and practices, especially creating and remixing videos, to foster mutual understanding. I discuss findings about how teachers created contexts and conditions for cosmopolitan practice by ethically navigating these challenging conversations, suggesting that a framework of cosmopolitan activity highlights important ethical dimensions in educational cross-cultural collaborations.

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1. Introduction

Educators are increasingly participating in online collaborations that connect teachers and students using digital tools, with emerging technologies making it easier than ever before to communicate with people in distant places. Sometimes called *telecollaborations* or *virtual exchanges* (Himelfarb & Idriss, 2011; Hobbs, Cabral, Ebrahimi, Yoon, & Al-Humaidan, 2011), these digital partnerships expand more traditional efforts to learn about different cultures and develop teachers' and students' intercultural competence (e.g., through pen pal exchanges, study abroad programs, or international visits). Examining how teachers engage in these digitally mediated cross-cultural collaborations is particularly

important given the central role schools and teachers play in preparing an increasingly diverse student population to participate in a globalized, networked world (Balistreri, Di Giacomo, Noisette, & Ptak, 2011; Popkewitz & Rizvi, 2009; Suarez-Orozco, 2007).

Not only do teachers need to prepare students to communicate thoughtfully, sensitively, and ethically across differences while using a variety of new tools, they also need to engage in these communicative practices themselves (Merryfield, 2000, 2003). Such a cosmopolitan approach to teaching and learning, whereby teachers see themselves as "citizens of the world" who are part of "a global community that extends us beyond our cultural and national borders" (Hamilton & Clandinin, 2010, p. 1228), is part of a broader effort by scholars to theorize teaching from an international standpoint and to consider how teachers develop global perspectives (e.g., Dolby & Rahman, 2008; Goodwin, 2010; Hamilton & Clandinin, 2010, 2011; Kissock & Richardson, 2010; Merryfield,

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2003). In light of the pressing need to understand how educators develop cosmopolitan perspectives, this article explores the possibilities and challenges of these global, digitally mediated collaborations, focusing on one such partnership between teachers in India, South Africa, and the United States as they navigated the challenges of communicating and collaborating across differences in language, culture, ideology, and geography.

1.1. Possibilities for cosmopolitan practice in cross-cultural digital collaborations

While online educational collaborations offer a range of potential benefits, a primary one involves opening new possibilities for educators to collaborate and communicate with people they may not otherwise. Research has demonstrated that educators need explicit and sustained opportunities to engage with others who bring to bear a diversity of cultural backgrounds, languages, and experiences (Ladson-Billings, 2005; Merryfield, 2000; Milner, 2005; Sleeter, 2000), particularly if they are to develop capacities to teach in/for global contexts (Goodwin, 2010; Kissock & Richardson, 2010; Rios, Montecinos, & Van Olphen, 2007; Sleeter, 2001). Rather than simply celebrating an uncritical vision of global togetherness, however, a cosmopolitan approach to these global collaborations that reflexively addresses issues of power and privilege can serve as a catalyst for social change (Chouliaraki, 2016).

A central means of bringing such issues of power and privilege to the fore when connecting educators internationally involves creating opportunities for people to engage in dialogue across differences in ideas, experiences, and beliefs—and to express those contrasting ideas in generative ways. Dobie and Anderson (2015) examined how *contrasting ideas*, which they define as those representing different or oppositional perspectives, can be used as a resource in collective problem solving, particularly when teachers engage in open discussion, responding to one another's ideas directly. Dobie and Anderson's study echoes previous research on the generative nature of engaging with people who have conflicting beliefs, experiences, and ideas, with conflict serving as an "essential component" (Achinstein, 2002, p. 425) in teaching communities that "can create the context for learning and thus ongoing renewal of communities" (p. 422). Grossman, Wineburg, and Woolworth (2001) argue that fruitful teacher communities not only expect conflict to occur but develop strategies that openly, honestly, and productively work with differences and manage contrasting ideas and beliefs through discussion and reflection (see also Skerrett, 2010; Van Es, 2012). The capacity to engage in dialogue with people who hold different perspectives, and to express differences of opinion in respectful, thoughtful, and ethical ways, is the centerpiece of a cosmopolitan approach to education (Hansen, 2011)—one with particular relevance for an increasingly conflictual world in which we must work together to address global challenges that often disproportionately disenfranchise and dehumanize the most vulnerable.

1.2. Challenges of teaching in cross-cultural digital collaborations

While emerging technologies and networked connectivity certainly open up possibilities for educators and youth to engage in generative global collaborations, they also offer challenges in communicating with distant others. One of the most salient challenges involves *how* to engage in mediated communication effectively—in what languages, with what tools and resources, and across what material and ideological barriers? As students and teachers become linked in new configurations through networked technologies, they often communicate multimodally with

unknown and unanticipated audiences using multiple languages (Canagarajah, 2012; Luke, 2004; Hull, Stornaiuolo, & Sahni, 2010; New London Group, 1996). These communicative challenges are amplified in spaces where teachers must navigate commitments to diverse groups of people across unequal local, translocal, transnational, and global exigencies (Blommaert, 2010; Lam & Warriner, 2012; Suárez-Orozco, 2007).

Certainly all teachers must balance the needs of various local stakeholders (e.g., children, parents, co-workers, administrators) with more distant demands (e.g., district mandates, state or national certifications, testing requirements, technology initiatives), but this balancing act becomes exponentially complicated in light of new commitments and responsibilities in global collaborations. Specifically, these partnerships operate in unequal systems of privilege and power, particularly in places with deeply rooted legacies of colonialism and neocolonialism, requiring teachers to navigate potentially conflictual relationships even as they work to balance local and global commitments (Kubota, 2014; Luke, 2004; Mitchell & Parker, 2008). While conflict sits at the heart of all communities and can support teaching and learning, it remains a key challenge in educational communities, where teachers are routinely tasked with facilitating discussions about complex social and cultural issues facing learners (e.g., race, gender, sexuality, (dis)ability). Leveraging conflict for its positive outcomes requires support, practice, and a willingness to engage in expressing diverse opinions in open and respectful dialogue that can take into account people's positionality and participation in systems that maintain social inequalities.

1.3. The current study

This article focuses on a study of the four original teachers in the Space2Cre8 (S2C8) project, which connected students on an educational social network (see Hull et al., 2010). The study, a multisited ethnography (Marcus, 1995), followed the four teachers in India, South Africa, and the United States over 2 years as they linked their in-school and after-school media literacy classes where students created media projects like digital stories, photo essays, short films, and documentaries. In addition to making media, students shared and circulated artifacts online, interacting in various ways on the private, youth-driven network, primarily in English, as they talked about their lives and their media work. The central research question I address in this article is: In what ways do teachers participating in an educational global collaboration develop their practices and beliefs about cross-cultural learning and teaching, especially in relation to others in the networked community and in response to challenges?

I am centrally concerned here with how the S2C8 teachers engaged in and fostered challenging conversations over 2 years, both among themselves and between students. In the study, I defined *challenging conversations* as interactions in which people expressed and grappled with potentially conflictual points of view and beliefs. For example, challenging conversations arose around questions of youth sexuality, especially for participants who had different cultural taboos or personal concerns around discussing such topics in educational settings; I detail later how one U.S. student's blog about coming out as bisexual led to a number of challenging conversations for teachers and students. The findings section describes how teachers came to frame and model these challenging conversations as a central means of promoting cross-cultural understanding, experimenting with different digital tools to help mediate those conversations. I argue that one of the most difficult parts of engaging in global collaborations for educators is learning to have and facilitate these challenging conversations using new tools and practices, which often afford multiple ways of

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