A Media Literate Approach to Developing Diversity Education

Fernando Naiditch

Department of Secondary and Special Education, Montclair State University, Montclair, NJ, USA

Abstract

This article describes a classroom project developed in a course on diversity education that required pre-service teachers to use media literacy as a way to cross cultural borders and reach out to an online partner to exchange information and learn about different ways of relating to the world and interpreting cultural phenomena. Students kept a journal in which they recorded and reflected upon their experiences. The project resulted in an increased awareness of the potential of social networks and online learning platforms in helping students connect to different people, engage in cross-cultural communication and participate in new online communities.

Keywords: media literacy, cultural diversity, diversity education, college students

Introduction

Schools in the United States have changed dramatically over the past few decades. The large number of languages, cultures, ethnicities, races, and socio-economic statuses represented in today's classrooms reflects a dramatic change in the demographics of the student population and of American society in general. Diversity is a reality in and outside the classroom, and learning to socialize in the larger society outside the classroom implies developing an understanding of both the meaning and the practice of diversity (Banks 2012). More than ever before, there is an urgent need to prepare teachers and students in the classroom who are capable of incorporating multiple viewpoints, of understanding and relating to differences, and of practicing diversity in order to become informed citizens and thus succeed in the larger society.

This same change in demographics has been accompanied by a change in the way students learn and communicate. Digital technologies have transformed the way students learn, how teachers teach, and the way we relate to each other in society (Gee 2007). Given the vast amount of media tools and resources, educators today face the difficult task of having to both learn for themselves and also teach students how to discern among all the information available to create purposeful learning experiences for their students (ISTE 2008).

Apart from creating schools that promote diversity, K-12 educators also need to prepare tech-nologically savvy learners who can use technology to communicate effectively in this changing society and to use digital media critically as a way of improving learning, instruction, and intercultural communication. A substantial aspect of developing literacy skills in schools today includes becoming media literate— building on traditional literacy skills to include the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate information in both print and non-print (NAMLE 2007a).

The use of media tools for educational purposes can be a powerful aid in promoting and enhancing diversity and its many meanings. In addition, given the context of diversity that characterizes schools across the country, one would think that digital media would be used almost as an organic response to our current societal needs (Page 2008). However, the increased use of social networks and online learning platforms does not always translate in increased opportunities for students to interact with people who are different from them or to seek opportunities to broaden their horizons and learn about other cultures, socio-cultural backgrounds, and economic backgrounds (Bauerlein 2008), not because these online platforms do not have the potential to do so, but mostly because people more often than not choose not to engage with "difference." This article discusses a classroom project that requires pre-service teachers to use media literacy as a way to cross cultural borders and help diminish the gap between cultures and groups in classrooms and schools. The project makes use of students' individual skills, beliefs, and experiences to

help construct their own meanings from the messages they exchange and from the interactions they establish online.

On Multicultural Education and Diversity

In the United States, multicultural education is seen as a result of the civil rights movement of the 1960s (Banks 2004) and the focus is on reforming the nation's schools. In a country where the racial, ethnic, and socio-economic gap only becomes wider (Bell 2004), there is a sense of urgency in developing intercultural understanding. Gay (2004) recognizes that the definition of multicultural education depends on the content, focus, and orientation of the approach being considered. Based on Banks' (2004) tripartite definition of multicultural education, she identifies the following categories:

- Multicultural education as a *philosophy*, concept, or idea: a set of beliefs and values that represent ethnic and cultural influences on lifestyles, experiences, and identities of a group. As a philosophy, multicultural education encompasses cultural pluralism and educational equality and excellence.
- Multicultural education as a *process*: an approach to education that places multiculturalism as a continuous and systematic element within a more comprehensive understanding of education. As a process, multicultural education should not be developed as a program or method, but as a progressive course of ideas and actions.
- Multicultural education as a *reform movement*: a structural and procedural change in education that reflects the larger change in society—social cultural, ethnic, racial, and linguistic diversity. As a movement, multicultural education focuses on empowering individuals towards social action and transformation.

As a movement, multicultural education represented a contrast to the prevalence of Anglo-European views around which school curricula were centered and a shift to including the perspectives of culturally disadvantaged populations. According to Bennett (2011), four broad principles guided the movement: the theory of cultural pluralism, the ideals of social justice, affirmation of all cultures in the process of teaching and learning, and visions of educational equity and excellence.

Of all these principles, cultural pluralism seemed to carry the heaviest weight in the development of multicultural education, particularly in view of America being a country of immigrants. Cultural pluralism embraces the democratic principles that guided the foundation of the United States by giving all groups of immigrants the right to maintain their heritage—culture, language, and religion. Although national identity was an important aspect in the assimilation of immigrant groups, it was also seen as a compromise as immigrants integrated into the American society. Ethnic minorities were expected to participate in the life of the society by exercising some level of acculturation, but they were also allowed to maintain and affirm their home culture. Also at the heart of the multicultural education movement is the struggle to end racism and any other form of oppression (which includes issues of class, age, gender, disabilities, and sexual orientation, among others) and to eliminate any structural element in society that creates or reinforces socio-economic inequalities. As an approach to teaching and learning, multicultural education envisions equity in the school system, proposes reform in the curriculum, and calls for a commitment to social justice. In a diverse society centered on principles of cultural pluralism, there is a need to respect students as individuals as well as members of a sub-group or an ethnic minority. This translates into embracing differences in the classroom and developing pedagogical practices that reflect acceptance to differences in the way students communicate, learn, and relate to each other.

In order to develop multicultural awareness in the classrooms, educators have focused on understanding the multiple dimensions of identity represented in their classrooms and in society as a way of promoting understanding and respect. Traditional approaches to diversity education have focused on identity formation by promoting the recognition of group differences and similarities. The focus has always been on learning to embrace those differences and similarities in order to produce harmony.

The acronym ART (Acceptance, Respect, and Tolerance) was initially used to represent the mindset that educators wanted their students to develop and embrace as citizens of a democratic pluralistic society (Naiditch 2010a). Acceptance of diversity requires the development of an appreciation towards it, an ability to identify and acknowledge its value and benefit to society. Respect refers to the consideration we should have towards one another as members of a community (or of different communities), and also, in a broader sense, respect for human life, dignity, and human rights. Finally, tolerance means developing an open mind and

working towards eliminating biases and stereotypes. The problem with the term tolerance, though, is that it is seen by many as endurance (i.e., it implies that one may accept diversity despite its possible "adverse" effects in society), and this is not the idea that advocates of multicultural education support. Instead of tolerance, the term open-mindedness might seem more appropriate in order to communicate this idea of willingness to communicate across cultural and linguistic barriers as a way of challenging stereotypes and biases.

Teaching for multicultural education and intercultural communication is a major disposition and a responsibility that teachers need to embrace in order to develop teaching and learning goals to protect civil liberties, to improve race relations, and to promote AROW (acceptance, respect, open-mindedness, willingness). The updated acronym highlights the importance of open-mindedness, but does not necessarily take diversity to the next level—the level of experience. Students can learn to accept and respect differences in society, but that understanding does not immediately translate into opportunity and practice.

On Media Literacy

Broadly defined, media literacy includes the ability to develop and use critical thinking skills (such as sorting through, analyzing, and assessing information) to interpret media messages and to create meanings out of those messages. NAMLE's (2007a) definition of media literacy highlights the idea of empowerment—by becoming media literate, people learn to use critical lenses both as consumers of media messages and as producers of their own messages.

Like multicultural education, media literacy, therefore, includes a series of general competencies, but also a set of sub-skills that are developed in particular contexts, depending on the tasks in which people engage. For example, the ability to analyze is a general competency, but the abilities to problem-solve, examine, and scrutinize can be considered sub-skills of analyze, as they usually refer to specific aspects included in an analysis.

Media literacy is both skill- and inquiry-based. It requires people to analyze and create content at the same time that they develop critical lenses through which they interpret the meaning-making process. Integrating media and inquiry, content, and process also helps people become more literate on issues of diversity, especially when it comes to interpreting and responding to the way media messages represent and portray different facets of diversity in society. The need for media literacy becomes even more evident when we take into account the new generation of people who are growing up surrounded by massive amounts of information, conflicting messages, and new forms of media that are constantly being developed.

First, it is important to recognize that this generation, which includes the pre-service teachers I describe in this article, is definitely connected. They spend a lot of time online, and social networks like Facebook are a big part of their lives (Cain 2012). Cain (2012) believes that digital media has changed not only the way we communicate, but also the different types of information we share online. Students communicate via texting, share personal aspects of their lives in various online communities, and identify themselves as members of such communities. Moreover, they believe that online platforms offer an easier and more convenient way of reaching out to others.

Second, pre-service teachers' understanding of diversity seems to be restricted to a specific number of categories, particularly race, ethnicity, and national origin. Most prospective teachers identify the need to understand diversity in order to function in their classrooms and in an organized society, but do not necessarily see themselves as part of this movement. In Gay's (2004) words, most of them view multicultural education as a philosophy and even a process, but they do not identify with the idea of reform, especially one that would include their participation.

The paradox teacher educators face in teaching courses on diversity and intercultural communication is how to approach an issue that, even though is part of our daily practice in society, is still considered by many as taboo or complicated. Diversity and intercultural communication are most definitely complex processes that need to be analyzed from different perspectives. However, in a society that claims to be pluralistic and in colleges that try as hard as they can to promote a diversity culture, it is hard to imagine that discussions on the practice of diversity would pose any threat to the identity of the students (Stulberg and Chen 2011). Moreover, if our students identify themselves as members of a generation that is constantly "connected" and always "plugged in" (Cain 2012), a question persisted: Why is it that—even with all the tools, resources and skills that would enable students to reach out to others and learn about different realities without even having to go the distance—these students do not take action? Why is it that students who have

the potential to navigate the world with the touch of a button do not even seem to want to use the available technology to learn about worlds and people who do not look like them, think like them, or act like them?

The idea behind the classroom project described in this article was to bring together diversity and media literacy education by expanding pre-service teachers' understandings of diversity issues at the same time that they developed media literacy skills. In other words, as students communicated with online partners in order to discuss specific aspects of diversity that they were interested in, they also learned to relate to, make sense of, and interpret the messages they received and sent. More specifically, the project focused on the following sub-skills:

1. understanding how audiences construct meanings on issues of diversity through media consumption and creation
2. identifying stereotypes, bias and racism in media messages
3. evaluating media messages based on life experiences, class readings and discussions
4. responding to and producing messages in culturally and socially appropriate ways
5. reflecting on the interactions with people and text through the Internet and on the process of developing relationships and exchanging information online.

An important aspect of becoming media literate is that students come to understand the role that all forms of media play in society as they develop critical thinking skills, especially when it comes to issues of diversity. Critical thinking is another one of those general competencies, and its sub-skills include, among others, an ability to inquire, to learn to ask questions and interpret answers contextually, to read between the lines, and to express yourself in socially appropriate ways—all of which are needed to prepare citizens for a democratic society (NAMLE 2007b; Thoman and Jolls 2005). This definition echoes one of the tenets of the teacher education program at Montclair State University, which aims at preparing teachers who not only understand the principles of democracy, but who can transform these principles into instructional practices in their classrooms. An important part of my classroom instruction was to focus on aspects of diversity that overlap with democratic principles such as equality, equity, the preservation of human rights, citizen participation and engagement in the life of society, and tolerance and respect towards different

values, beliefs, and political views (Goodlad, Mantle-Bromley, and Goodlad 2004).

Becoming media and multiculturally literate requires students to be critical, creative, and conscientious. Students need to develop the ability to understand how meaning is produced and the impact that media messages have in their lives, so they can be in control of their experiences, which brings us back to the idea of empowerment. Undoubtedly, the abilities to understand text, to make meaningful comparisons and connections between ideas, to assess content, and to create new knowledge gives students the power to make informed decisions in their lives and to decide on courses of action. The relationship of literacy and power was clearly delineated by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1970), whose idea of students as subjects of their own history (as opposed to objects) highlights the importance of literacy both in helping students find and develop their own voices, and in transforming their learning process by engaging them critically with the material.

An essential aspect of critical media literacy, therefore, is that it moves students from objects to subjects of their histories by engaging them in dialogical action with other members of the community and with the materials being studied (Freire 1992). The aim of engaging students in a project that required them to find appropriate interlocutors and to develop meaningful interactions was to help them develop these critical literacy skills that enable people to live their lives as informed, critical and actively engaged citizens of their diverse communities, and to also develop a sense of responsibility towards themselves and others. Moreover, because we live in a message-saturated world (Potter 2012), the need to be able to discern between messages, read between the lines, and understand cause and consequence become essential tools in forming media literate educators.

Baker (2012) refers to communications scholar Marshall McLuhan's metaphor of a fish swimming in the ocean as being oblivious to the water to describe the role of media literacy in today's society: after all "we live and swim in a world of media, but we seldom stop to study how the media work, or think about their impacts on our lives" (2). "Media literacy," he adds, "is designed to do just that and more" (2). By bringing together diversity and media, the class project described here aimed at helping prepare informed educators who can interpret how diversity messages are constructed through media, for what purposes, and for what ends.

Media Literacy and Diversity among Pre-Service Teachers

The course I teach on diversity education is part of an undergraduate program in teacher education and is required of all pre-service teachers. Classes have an average of thirty to thirty-five students, mostly in their early twenties, who are preparing to become teachers of various content areas, from math to sciences, languages to the arts, social studies to physical education. Having taught the course for a number of years now, I have come to realize that we are preparing a new generation of teachers who are leaving our program with a set of skills that involves being able to communicate constantly and effectively through digital media.

It would be natural to assume that with the growth of technological tools, social networks, and online learning platforms that can be accessed by anyone all over the world, the pre-service teachers in my class would take the initiative to cross borders and get to know another history or reality, to learn about different ways of seeing and interpreting the world. However, initial classroom discussions and interactions demonstrated the opposite. Students in my class admit to being active consumers of media messages and spend much of their time online. They participate in online communities, social networks, and chat groups. The purposes of their use of digital media are usually to connect with friends and family, to learn about people's lives, and to stay informed of what is happening in the immediate communities. The benefits they identify for being "connected" have to do with online communication being easy and fast; an environment that allows participants to get quick responses without having to schedule meetings or interact face-to-face.

As part of my initial class discussion on the relationships between online communities, media messages, and diversity, my students argued that their experiences with diversity were happening through social networks and other learning platforms. However, when asked to be more specific or provide examples to support their statements, students could not substantiate their arguments that diversity exists online. The fact that Facebook today boasts a record number of over one billion users (Thier 2012) may lead us to think that people around the world are, in fact, crossing cultural borders. However, this experiment of one undergraduate classroom points to a larger issue that neither Facebook nor any other social network was able to properly address. How can we make use of social networks to effectively promote intercultural communication and diversity education?

Most pre-service teachers in my classes say that they have Facebook accounts, that they are regularly connected through it, and that this is the way to keep informed of what is going on in their neighborhoods and in the world. This is a fact that Facebook itself claims to be true and is referred to as *information diversity*. Online social networks, the Facebook newsroom website claims, "actually increase the spread of novel information and diverse viewpoints" (Bakshy 2012). No one is denying that information spreads faster than a virus on the web and that breaking news or the latest Lady Gaga music video are not immediately accessed all over the world by millions of people. But the question remains: Does having access to information actually translate into opportunity for students to practice intercultural communication and diversity education? And how does that help them develop media literacy skills? Exposure and access do not immediately translate into practice. Social networks can be a powerful medium to share news and current events, to disseminate information, and to promote products, events, organizations, and people. None of these, however, necessarily lead to a change in the way people relate to others across the lines of race, ethnicity, economics, nationality, religion, language, and/or culture. My classroom analysis indicated that pre-service teachers were still connecting with like-minded people. Their social networks were widespread—they consisted of friends, family members, and even students from other college campuses—but all of those were within the same socio-economic status, race, and educational background.

The Diversity Project

The new framework for diversity education I have been developing was borne out of the concept of opportunity and practice in intercultural communication (Naiditch 2006a). Opportunity is a key concept in helping students understand and practice diversity. In my course on diversity education, students have been incorporating media tools and social networks as a way to bring cultures together and to cross cultural bridges. This echoes NAMLE's fifth Core Principle, which recognizes that media are a part of culture and function as agents of socialization (2007b, 4). In this particular case, my intention is to socialize prospective teachers across cultural representations of topics such as gender, sexuality, racism, and stereotyping, among

others. The emphasis was on finding opportunities to experience and embrace diversity—to move from the initial understanding of AROW to a lived experience.

The guidelines I gave my students instructed them to identify an online partner based on the issues and topics from the course curriculum, reach out to the identified partner, and develop a relationship by exchanging messages regularly. Students were asked to record the whole process by keeping a journal in which they would also reflect on the experience and relate it to course readings and class discussions.

The first step of the project required the pre-service teachers to find an online partner to develop a relationship. For that, they had to make use of their research and technical skills to look for and identify a person, an organization, a club, or a society that could offer an online experience that they would not normally seek. They were encouraged to make use of social media or any other online platform they already belonged to or were familiar with to initiate the process. They had to identify a course topic of their interest in order to search for and find an appropriate online partner to develop this project. Then, they needed to reach out to the identified target, start a conversation, and develop a relationship. They were prompted to think of issues and questions that relate to diversity and its many facets in order to understand how their online partner views and practices diversity. This most certainly required cultural and linguistic sensitivity. Developing a relationship with an online partner requires people to build up specific communication styles and strategies.

As they engaged in this ongoing conversation with their online partner, they were also asked to keep a journal (or a blog) to record their evolving thinking, feelings, doubts, and questions. The blog/journal writing was also a venue for them to reflect on all the issues brought up by this online experience and to connect those with classroom discussions, readings, and activities. We addressed all the issues they brought up in class, and we used the information they gathered to analyze aspects of diversity that relate to the way people go about their lives, establish relationships, connect to others, and learn about diversity issues online.

At the end of the semester, they were asked to share their journal/blog with the course instructor and assess this experience in terms of what they learned and how it affected their thinking and understanding of diversity and intercultural communication, particularly as they are practiced and experienced through the World Wide Web. They were also asked to think of how they could translate this experience into their future classroom as culturally responsive teachers.

The project required these pre-service teachers to step out of their comfort zone. In previous versions of this same course, one of the requirements was that students engage in some kind of activity that they would not normally engage in—and that activity had to involve people that they would not normally or spontaneously interact with. The criteria for stepping out of one's comfort zone included different areas of diversity, which means that students could choose what to do, as long as it truly represented aspects of diversity and cross-cultural communication. In the past, some of the activities students engaged in included: visiting inner city projects and interviewing residents, participating in a religious celebration of another religion, taking a salsa dance lesson, shopping at the Asian market for particular types of food, attending a foreign language class, and spending an evening at a gay club, among others. Having to physically move and take action proved to have been extremely difficult for students who were raised in encapsulated communities and whose world involved no more than a couple of square miles. This means that something that may sound as simple as attending a cultural festival or taking the train to New York City to spend some time in the city can in fact have an impact on someone who has never even considered stepping out of the cultural universe they have always known to be safe, comfortable, and predictable.

In order to transfer that experience to the world of media messages and extend it to the online communities my students were already engaged in, I came up with a number of guiding questions: Can one truly experience diversity online? What kinds of experiences do the online world and learning platforms offer for students to experience and engage in meaningful intercultural interactions? What are the possibilities and the limits of social networks in promoting intercultural communication and enhancing diversity education?

Asking students to step out of their comfort zone implies that they are going to interact and possibly develop a relationship with someone who is different from them for one reason or another—a different language, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or socio-economic status. Moreover, it implies recording the evolving relationship (by writing and reflecting about it in a journal or blog) and identifying aspects that have possibly affected the way they think or

relate to people from the moment they established that relationship. It also implies becoming media literate by developing the skills that promote a critical look at the messages being exchanged.

The assessment of the project was based on whether or not students completed the necessary steps— identifying an appropriate online partner, establishing a relationship, and maintaining the conversation—and on how they related their learning experiences in class to their future roles as teachers (see appendix 1).

Emergent Findings

Engaging in this endeavor was not an easy task. It required a lot of preparation. The way to decide how to find an online partner to develop the project was basically the same the students used when doing the first activity that required them to physically go somewhere. Students were asked to identify an area of diversity that they would either like to know more about or that they felt they did not fully understand. Students then used their research skills to look for and identify a person, an organization, a club, or a society that could offer an online experience that they would not normally seek. Once they identified the issue they wanted to study and an online partner that could serve as an interlocutor for the project, they needed to contact this person or organization. Reaching out to the identified target, starting the conversation, and developing a relationship are actions that required cultural and linguistic sensitivity. Developing those skills were part of the course curriculum, which included aspects of pragmatics, cross-cultural communication, and even second language acquisition. Students were developing their projects while reading and discussing examples in the literature about cultural studies, such as the notion of high and low-context cultures (Hall 1990) and the guidelines for understanding cultural differences developed by Longstreet (1978).

Moreover, developing the media literacy skills needed to interact with their online partners in culturally and socially appropriate ways also became one of the aims of this classroom project. The generation of teachers I am preparing is communicating in a world where new media have forced us to develop new literacies and new understandings of reading and writing the world. Their voices are being sought and developed in the midst of media messages and images that they need to learn to comprehend, interpret, relate to, and respond to in critical and informed ways.

Youth voice, as Hoechsmann and Low (2008)

have argued, "is increasingly finding a vehicle and a home in online contexts" (6), which means that my students already come to class versed in the language of emails, IMs and chat rooms, and the blogosphere. What they do lack, many times, is the ability to critically interpret the messages they come across daily. Developing media literacy skills involves the ability to engage in the universe of media messages in informed and responsible ways.

For this diversity project and the course in general, this meant developing curriculum that focused on guiding students, as they interacted with their online partners, to constantly reflect about both the messages and the process they were engaging in. After all, as Mueller (2008) has pointed out, "one cannot be a good communicator, good problem-solver, good collaborator, or good information seeker without careful and thoughtful participation in those processes" (7).

Because we were dealing with the world of social and digital media from an educational perspective, the issue of media literacy was always brought up in class discussions. The pre-service teachers were asked to not only get information as they connected with people and organizations online, but they were also encouraged to ask difficult questions, discuss complicated concepts and issues, voice their opinions, and engage in debate with their online partners in appropriate ways. In order to address the issue of online communication and etiquette—an area still in its infancy—I actually borrowed concepts and ideas from my own previous research on second language acquisition and on how second language learners develop an interculture—the necessary social skills that go along with language use in order to communicate their meanings adequately within the cultural norms of the linguistic community (Naiditch 2006a; 2006b; 2010b).

Interacting effectively with others and being successful in developing relationships requires four sets of skills—communication, collaborative, leadership, and interpersonal (Mueller 2008). This means that these are essential skills that we focused on through pedagogical classroom techniques, such as role-plays, group projects, and classroom debates.

The process of engaging in interactions outside of students' comfort zones through online communities and social networks was carefully scaffolded by theoretical aspects discussed in class and also by having students confront their own perceptions of the world and their own biases and prejudices. Students were asked

to engage in an autobiographical activity and to keep a blog or a journal to record their evolving thinking, feelings, doubts, and questions. The blog/journal writing also provided a safe venue for students to reflect on all the issues brought up by their online experiences. Some students wrote about linguistic differences and how that affected their views on English language learners in the classroom; others wrote about how hard it is to make yourself understood cross-culturally in the online world without the aid of paralinguistic and prosodic features that a face-to-face interaction provides; still, others spent the whole semester studying the effects of race on the academic achievement of African American students after having interacted with students from a southern state.

Class discussions were a result of the different online experiences students had during the semester. Students commented on how hard it was to reach out to their partners, to initiate the conversation, to develop an online academic relationship, and how frustrating it was not to get responses or to have to sometimes wait for a long period of time before their questions were answered or their comments were addressed. The activity dictated part of the course curriculum and the readings. Even though the journals/blogs were only shared with the instructor, students were encouraged to share whatever they felt comfortable sharing in class with everyone. Every week, a group of students led the discussion about their findings, their evolving thoughts, and their feelings. Students' assessment was based on the development of their autobiographical piece, class discussions, and the blog/journal on which they recorded and reflected upon their experiences.

The six items used to assess students (see appendix 1) reflected the fact that they were able to engage in the activity and develop media literacy skills, such as identifying and developing arguments, summarizing main ideas, and making meaningful connections between the project, course content, and their content areas (items 1 to 4 on the assessment scale). However, when it comes to positioning themselves more critically or demonstrating a deeper understanding of the assignment for their future roles as educators and citizens (items 5 and 6 on the assessment scale), some of the pre-service teachers may have hesitated or were afraid of committing to certain ideological positions or responding to arguments that may have caused friction in the relationship. My initial assessment of the project indicates that, as the item number goes up on the assessment scale, the more difficult it becomes for

some pre-service teachers to respond to them, which indicates that they may need to be more explicitly prompted to engage in the different tasks required to perform the project and that the media literacy skills needed to engage in the project may need to be spelled out and practiced from the very beginning of the course. Overall, though, most pre-service teachers seem to have gained a broader understanding of how diversity issues are practiced in various online communities at the same time that they developed different media literacy skills. Students had different outcomes, but that was to be expected. Like any other tool used to assess learning, there were students who engaged fully in the task and others who just completed the minimum requirements.

The frequency with which they interacted with their online partner made a difference in the overall assessment of this project; after all, the idea was to learn to develop an online relationship, and this requires attending to frequency and promptness in sending and responding to messages. This was verified by having students record every instance of communication with dates and journal/blog entries. One of the most important parts of assessing their learning from my perspective as the course instructor was that most students were able to reflect on the experience using course materials and content to analyze messages exchanged and lessons learned. Moreover, because this is a course for pre-service teachers, I asked my students to address how they would translate this experience to their future classroom as culturally responsive teachers, how they could relate what they had experienced to their respective content areas, and how they could develop curriculum that would make use of media literacy skills in order to educate their students to become engaged, critical, and informed citizens of our ever changing society. In order to respond to these questions fully, these pre-service teachers still need more exposure to pedagogy, such as a methods course in their content area and their student teaching semester.

In terms of media literacy competence, the project seems to have had an effect on my students. It was reassuring to see them talk about the ways they (and others) present themselves in the digital world, the way they made use of their skills and learning styles to develop communicative strategies to interact online, and the connections they established as they learned to distinguish between content, viewpoints, and ideologies, and how these are expressed though digital media. They also developed an understanding of the role language plays in mediating all these relationships.

Finally, this project was a way of integrating the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to become effective teachers in the twenty-first century.

Concluding Remarks

The diversity project described in this article was a way of creating a meaningful and purposeful opportunity for students to learn how to cross cultural borders by making use of digital tools and resources that are already part of their identities as learners and citizens of a larger community. The project was a pedagogical strategy aimed at creating an opportunity and a reason for students to reach out and to experience different ways of seeing the world and interpreting cultural phenomena. Initial assessment from the project suggests that pre-service teachers increased their awareness of the potential of social networks and online learning platforms in helping students cross cultural borders and participate in different cultural communities. They also became more aware of their literacy skills, as they were asked to reflect on their own communication styles, linguistic resources, language use, meaning-making strategies, as well as those of their online partners. Students were prompted to consciously question linguistic and rhetorical strategies people use to create and communicate meanings, and the resources and media literacy skills needed to critically interpret messages received or exchanged. NAMLE's Core Principles 4 and 6 were of particular importance for this project, as pre-service teachers need to learn to make informed pedagogical decisions in the classroom and that requires taking responsibility for their choices and for their media use. Apart from that, they need to teach students how to make these informed choices in their lives and how to make meaning of all the media messages they consume and produce.

In order to promote diversity, educators need to create and scaffold media literate experiences for students to experiment and engage in intercultural communication. Using social networks, online learning platforms, and digital media in general is an appropriate way of achieving that aim. Students make use of tools they are familiar with in order to explore an unfamiliar territory. The digital world offers them a sense of security. As students engaged in this project, they regulated the amount of information shared and how personal they wanted to get. Their level of engagement in the project was dictated by their comfort level, even though the idea was to step out of it. This is both an advantage and a drawback. Many students may hide behind the screen of a computer and may hesitate and choose not to engage in truthful interactions. Still, the marriage of media literacy and diversity is an area of multiple possibilities that needs to be further explored. Digital media can provide meaningful and rich experiences for students to experience diversity. Whether they choose to be observers or active members in the process, they are still being exposed to a different reality.

The questions I had initially asked about whether or not diversity could be experienced online and about the kinds and quality of experiences I could have my students exposed to through online communities have been answered in ways that will inform my pedagogy as I continue to teach this course. This was a first attempt at using media as a way of understanding the concept of diversity and the lived diversity experiences people share online. In that sense, this was an example of learning that engages students at the same time that it helps them to further and refine their literacy skills and their use of digital media. Even though students had varied experiences in terms of intensity, length, depth and quality, they all engaged in a familiar environment in unfamiliar ways.

Rushkoff (2011) has argued that, in the digital world, what really matters is not content, but contact. The Internet has provided us with another medium for interaction and socialization and, "in this sense, our content choices are just means to an end—social currency through which we can make connections with others" (128). The diversity project I have developed was a way to help my students develop their social currency in terms of connecting to others—however different they may be—and in the process develop the media literacy skills they need to be able to navigate this new world of digital communication in contextually appropriate ways.

Appendix 1: Diversity Project Assessment Criteria

Name: _____

Dates of Project: From _____ to _____

Online Partner: _____

Journal/Blog Content

Assessment of your journal/blog will be based on the following criteria:

Assessment item	NAMLE CP *	Number of points
1. Student provides background and contextual information on how online partner was identified, reasons that justify and support choice, how interlocutor was contacted, initial reactions and feelings that student and interlocutor may have expressed.	2	3
2. Student identifies the central concepts, arguments, and points in the messages sent and received. Messages or chain of communication need to be presented in the journal with the appropriate dates. Student needs to identify and develop arguments and assess the way they were addressed by both interlocutors. Student needs to be able to identify how the interaction and conversation evolved and demonstrate his/her evolving thinking as messages were exchanged.	1	3
3. Student accurately summarizes and explains the content of interaction, degree of involvement and depth of conversation. Student demonstrates his/her ability to sum up the ideas exchanged during the interaction and summarize them in a paragraph.	1, 4	3
4. Student clearly and logically articulates the relationship of the messages (text) to issues being addressed in the course and to the readings assigned in the syllabus. Student makes explicit connections between messages exchanged and class content by identifying specific class discussions or specific parts of the readings or authors that have addressed the issues being studied online.	5, 6	3
5. Student relates the experience from the class project to his/her future role as an educator. Student needs to make explicit connections between this class project and the task of teachers in educating and preparing students to participate as active members of a democratic society. Students need to include examples of classroom practices or activities that reflect culturally responsive pedagogy.	4, 5, 6	4
6. Explanations of concepts, arguments, and conclusions are clear. Student draws conclusion based on the experience and is encouraged to assess the quality and the purpose of the assignment. Student is also asked to address how his/her views of diversity and diversity education have changed based on this project.	3, 4	4

* NAMLE's Core Principle (CP) most aligned with the assessment item.

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