Online Digital Media in Elementary School: Promoting Cultural Understanding

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Abstract
Digital and mass media play a significant role in the development of children's understanding of people around the world. Specific instructional practices using media can help combat negative stereotypes and increase knowledge, tolerance and acceptance of the peoples and cultures of the Middle East. Media literacy education includes activities that involve both critical analysis and media production. In one U.S. school, elementary school children interacted with young adults in Kuwait by creating simple

videos and using an online communication tool. Evidence shows that both students and teachers decreased their reliance on cultural stereotypes. However, teachers also demonstrated substantial resistance to exploring contemporary news representations of the U.S. involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Keywords

stereotypes, multicultural education, Arab, culture, Muslim, Middle East, cultural understanding, global understanding, media literacy, technology, digital media, new media, integration, collaboration, elementary, action research, education, media education, university-school, curriculum, instruction

On June 4, 2009, when President Barack Obama offered an address at Cairo University in his first official trip to the Middle East, he acknowledged the great tension between the United States and the Arab world and the need to end the cycle of suspicion and discord. After describing his personal life history in Asia, North America and Africa, he explained, "partnership between America and Islam must be based on what Islam is, not what it isn't. I consider it part of my responsibility as President of the United States to fight against negative stereotypes of Islam wherever they appear" (Obama, 2009, p. 1).

Media messages, including images of Middle Eastern people and countries, serve as the primary vehicle for the 'social imagination,' a term used by Appadurai (1996) to refer to the interconnected global identities and possibilities for social action where ideas flow between fiction, current events, and social worlds. Children's media in the Middle East presents a world view that is simultaneously modern and traditional (Peterson, 2005), where Arabs, Muslims and Westerners are depicted as collaborative, engaged social agents in a modern world. By contrast, the common images of Arab males in the US popular culture are generally negative: villains, terrorists, oil sheiks, marauding tribesmen, and kidnappers of blonde women (Shaheen, 2000). While Arab males are portrayed in the media as sinister, brutal, violent, merciless and dangerous with robes and turbans, Arab females appear to be passive, weak and mute, and their faces covered by black hijabs. When these females are portrayed as vivacious, most of the time they are belly dancers. Both Arab males and females do not appear as ordinary people who have happy families and the usual jobs that most people encounter in their daily lives, like taxi or bus drivers, sales people, clerks, teachers, doctors or business people

(Akram, 2002; Almaeena, 2007; Shaheen, 2000; Silverblatt & Zlobin, 2004; Wingfield & Karaman, 2006).

In American children's media, such negative portrayals of Arabs are also prevalent. The famous Disney film *Aladdin (dir:* Alan Pakula), while at first glance conveys Arab characters in a favorable light, nonetheless portrays the hero and heroine as having light skin color and speaking with an Anglo-American accent while the villains by contrast have dark skin and an Arabic accent. The opening song of Aladdin also underscores stereotypes of Arab countries as mysterious and exotic. The lyrics of the

opening song of the original film are: "Oh, I come from a land, from a faraway place where the caravan camels roam. Where they cut off your ear if they don't like your face. It's barbaric, but hey, it's home." After protests by Arab Americans and challenges by the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, Disney modified the lyrics for the video to: "It's flat and immense, and the heat is intense. It's barbaric, but hey, it's home." Although this alteration was considered as a slight improvement over the original words, this modification still did not satisfy those who are concerned about prevailing negative stereotypes of Arab countries and their people (Wingfield & Karaman, 2006).

Growing up in the United States, children also see Arab villains in television cartoons and comic books. They can even encounter them while selecting Halloween costumes. For instance, *Batman*, the Saturday morning cartoon on Fox Children's Network, featured Arabs as fanatic allies who conspire to occupy the Earth. In comic books, an Arab chieftain kidnaps Jane in *Tarzan* while the Arab terrorists in *Superman* are characterized as a repulsive oil sheik villain and hijackers of a U.S. nuclear carrier. Moreover, Halloween masks depicting Arab people had

monstrous features after the events of September 11 (Wingfield & Karaman, 2006).

Media Literacy Education Promotes Global Understanding

Tyner (1998) distinguished between "tool literacies" and "literacies of representation" and this distinction continues to remain a robust feature of the 21st century education landscape. Tool literacies emphasize the knowledge and competencies involved in using digital media; these are undoubtedly important core skills for participating in contemporary culture today. Representational literacies (which include information literacy, media literacy and visual literacy) emphasize access, analysis, reflection and social action competencies associated with particular types of symbol systems. Representational literacies enable people to identify author purpose, target audience, bias, and point of view, supporting engagement in the kind of active, critical thinking about the messages that we both produce and consume as part of daily life.

Representational literacies can be particularly effective in building empathy toward members of particular social groups. Although some children who live in more

diverse communities may have the opportunity to learn about people from the Middle East in their real lives, reliance on personal experiences to learn about other cultures may be limiting since the process of reflection, analysis, and action may be missing in personal encounters. Systematic educational efforts to promote global cultural understanding may play a crucial role in cultivating acceptance, tolerance and inclusion, preventing children from acquiring prejudicial views towards others in terms of their ethnicity, color, or nationality (Almaeena, 2007; Alred, Byram, & Fleming, 2002; Montgomery, 2000).

Media literacy education has been used in school settings to teach about stereotyping and misrepresentation (Buckingham, 2003; Hobbs, 2007; Silverblatt & Zlobin, 2004). In Malta, one of seven European countries in which media literacy has been practiced in the school curricula, the lessons about stereotypes in mass media are required to be taught in all schools, according to the curriculum designed by their Ministry of Education in 1999 (Borg & Lauri, 2009). UNESCO has made longstanding efforts to include media and information literacy as a basic component of global cultural awareness. According to the media education training kit by UNESCO, *Media Education: A Kit for Teachers, Students, Parents and Professionals* (Frau-Meigs, 2006), both analysis and production activities are central to the pedagogy of media literacy education. In general, such activities tend to emphasize critical analysis over media composition. For example, a high school media literacy class in New Hampshire, English teachers used concepts of media literacy to teach the ways that mass media shape social and cultural realities. From the class activities and homework, students explored how different races, genders, and body types are represented (Hobbs, 2007).

However, little work has been done to examine how media literacy competencies might by activated by the use of online social media in the context of elementary education. For this reason, we wanted to explore the use of online social media activities with elementary school students as a means to promote cultural understanding of the peoples and cultures of the Middle East. One simple form of message production is pen-pal exchanges, an activity between geographically separated people that has been shown to be useful to children and young adults, including pre-service teachers. For example,

Shandomo (2009) used pen-pal exchanges between African-American children in Buffalo, New York with students in Zambia, with the goal of providing elementary school students with a broader view of the world, increasing social and cultural awareness, to developing content knowledge of where their pen pals live. Schoorman (2002) encouraged pre-service teachers to exchange letters with a class of middle school students from a school with a high percentage of economically impoverished children from diverse backgrounds. After one semester, data analysis revealed that the university students had a heightened awareness of multicultural difference and both young adults and children had shown improvements in writing. In our previous work, we have documented how elementary school children develop critical analysis skills through close viewing and other instructional strategies in the context of a university-school partnership (Hobbs et al, 2011). This paper focuses specifically on examining how digital media production activities with children, framed within a larger context of media literacy education, may support increased understanding of the people and cultures of the Middle East.

The Research Context

Children participating in this study attended school in a community in the metropolitan Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The community of about 21,000 residents is predominantly wealthy to upper-middle-class, with a median family income of $119,000 and a largely White population. Many of the residents work in professional fields, including banking, health care, and pharmaceutical industries, and 32% of the population have a master's degree or higher. However, there is significant economic diversity in this community, with 35% of residents come from families earning less than $50,000 in household income annually. Fewer than 10% of the community consists of immigrant families, representing a smattering of Asian and South Asian immigrants. A total of 240 children participated in the project in some capacity.

The school district is deeply committed to integrating tool literacies into the curriculum; as a result, computers and interactive white boards are plentiful. Three elementary teachers and the school library/media specialist participated in this project with faculty and graduate students from Temple University. However, like many U.S.

elementary educators, when we began this project, teachers were unfamiliar with the concept of representational literacies and in particular the pedagogy and practice of media literacy education. While teachers were somewhat familiar with the use of video cameras for documenting student performances and wikis as a tool for collaborative writing, they were unaware of the key concepts and core principles of media literacy (NAMLE, 2008). The major conceptual tenets in media literacy education include the following ideas: a focus on the fundamental nature of the constructedness of media messages, the role of interpretation in the meaning-making process, the relationship between form and content, the role of representations in shaping people's understanding of the social world, and the value of examining the social, political and economic context in which messages circulate.

This pilot program was limited in scope to one year. We conducted only three planning meetings with the school principal and members of the educational staff to develop the program. One meeting consisted of a 90-minute staff development program introducing the key concepts and core principles of media literacy and offering a viewing and discussion mini-lesson to demonstrate the process of critical media analysis. Other work occurred as researchers modeled media literacy lessons to students (with teachers observing classroom practice). Researchers also offered

curriculum ideas to teachers and offered technology support to small groups of students in video production-based activities.

To document the partnership process, members of the research team conducted informal interviews with teachers, made classroom observations, interviewed teachers and children, and collected student work samples. Limitations of our schedule prevented regular daily access to the classroom. Consequently, the team could not document whenever teachers were engaged in instructional practices related to this unit. Therefore, this paper is limited to report on only those aspects of the program that we were able to document through the aforementioned methods.

In addition to providing opportunities for children to critically analyze media representations of the people and cultures of the Middle East, we also wanted to connect children in the U.S. with young people in Kuwait using video and social networking tools

because of our belief that media literacy education can be used to combat negative stereotypes and deepen children's identification with the "other" through mediated social interaction using image, language, sound and music (Hobbs et al, 2011).

Informal Media Production as a Means of Cultural Sharing

As part of the learning experience, the elementary school children created informal comic strips (created with a simple online drag-and-drop production tool) and videos (made with a Flip video camera) to share their own experience of key aspects of daily life at school and at home. Videos were uploaded to Teacher Tube and then embedded on a wiki page by the classroom teachers (globalml.wikispaces.com). After brainstorming about topics they thought that Kuwaiti students might want to know more about, children in three classrooms created a total of five short videos. Four videos were shot by children while one was filmed by the school library/media teacher. Four videos featured various types of play or aspects of family life, while one focused on a school-related topic. For example, one video featured a child playing the part of a reporter who interviews two boys about the sport of baseball. The child asks questions like, "What's your favorite thing about baseball?" and "What's the object of the game?" Another group of students replayed a "typical" family dinner, where a group of eight children role-played the parents, older and young siblings, discussing what they did during the day and what they will do in the evening. One member of the "family" even played the violin. Another group of students show some of their favorite technologies, including the DS videogame system, where one boy offers an elaborate "how-to" advice on using a handheld game system. A review of these videos reveals evidence of peer collaboration and sensitivity to providing contextual information for viewers who are unfamiliar with aspects of American cultural life. Noteworthy is the significant pleasure children appear to experience in bringing various aspects of their "home life" (including features of parent-child interaction and use of videogames and the Internet) into school. By contrast, only one team of children addressed the topic of school by describing the structure of their school day. In this video, each child used a visual prop (like a book or object) to describe the various subjects and activities in their school day (i.e., science, math, language, art). This was a simple performance activity, filmed by the teacher in a single

shot, with little of the creativity evident in other videos where students took more active roles in shaping the content and filming the production themselves.

Strengthening Dialogue through Online Creative Expression

Children had the opportunity to interact with young adults from the Middle East through a digital pen-pal type exchange with three groups of Kuwaiti students. One group of Kuwaiti students was from the College of Basic Education, The Public Authority for Applied Education and Training (PAAET). These students were enrolled in the course, "Introduction to Educational Technology." Another group of students were Kuwait University students enrolled in the College of Women who had taken a course entitled, "Children and Media." A final group of students were those from the Mass Communication Department at Kuwait University who were studying "Mass Media and Society." A total of 38 college students from Kuwait and 65 Grade 3 students (ages 8 and 9) participated in this project. Table 1 shows a breakdown of the number of Kuwaiti students and the number of posts as distributed across three classrooms. As measured by the number of posts, different levels of participation in the three classrooms are evident. This evidence reflects teachers' varying comfort with online social media and their own attitudes about the value of computer use in the elementary grades. Interviews revealed that one teacher in particular, Mrs. Green, was highly enthusiastic about the cultural exchange and made substantial efforts to engage children in the process of interacting with Kuwaiti students. Her students contributed or two-thirds of the total user contributions.
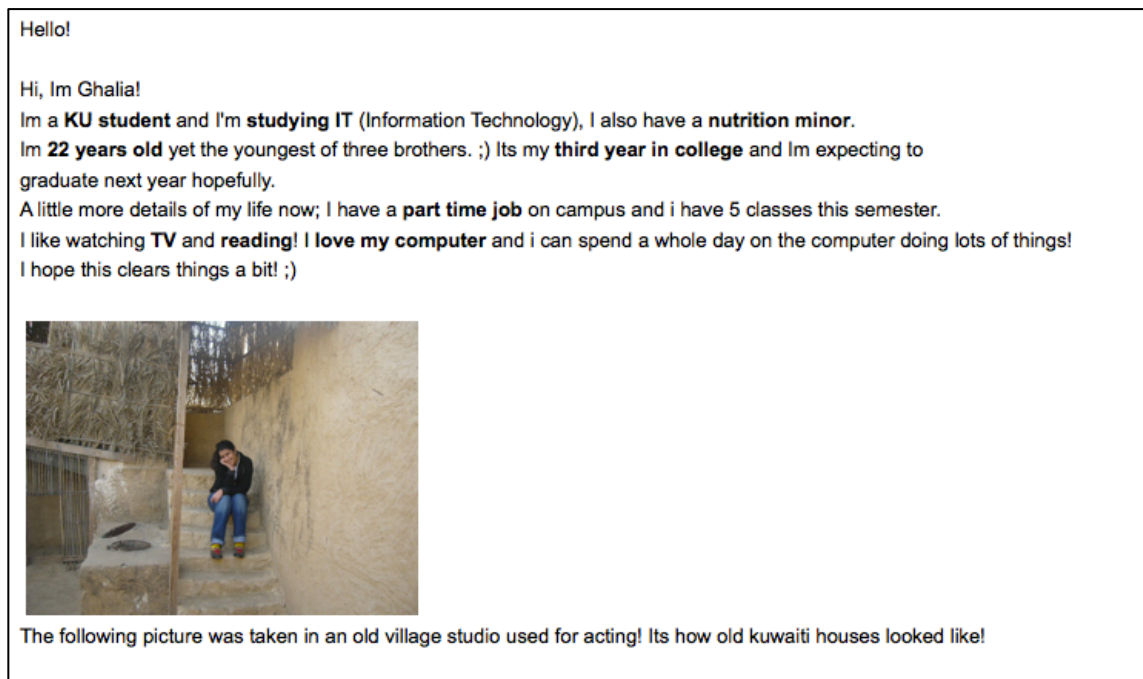
Table 1. Number of online interactions

Teacher A: Mrs. Green	
Student 1	58
Student 2	105
Student 3	143
Student 4	62
Student 5	90

Student 6	14
Student 7	2
Non-participants (5)	0
Teacher B: Mr. Brown	
Student 1	4
Student 2	3
Student 3	5
Student 4	4
Student 5	11
Student 6	4
Student 7	18
Non-participants (6)	6
Teacher C: Mrs. Black	
Student 1	34
Student 2	37
Student 3	44
Student 4	17
Student 5	11
Student 6	8
Student 7	17
Student 8	10
TOTAL: 38 participants	**718**

Decision-making about the appropriate type of technology tools for the purpose of cultural exchange was a significant component of this project. In order to manage the interaction of the elementary school children with college-level students in Kuwait, educators decided to use a wiki space rather than individual emails, making this a small-group sharing experience for students. This was important for teachers who wanted to be able to monitor students' online activity; individual emails would have made this difficult or impossible. Each Kuwaiti student was paired with three to five elementary children.

The Kuwaiti student was invited to create a mini-home page and the linked Discussion pages were used for children to post and share their questions and comments. Figure 1 shows an example of a mini-home page. This allowed students from both cultures to use media technology to forge a connection intended to deepen their understanding of each other's culture.
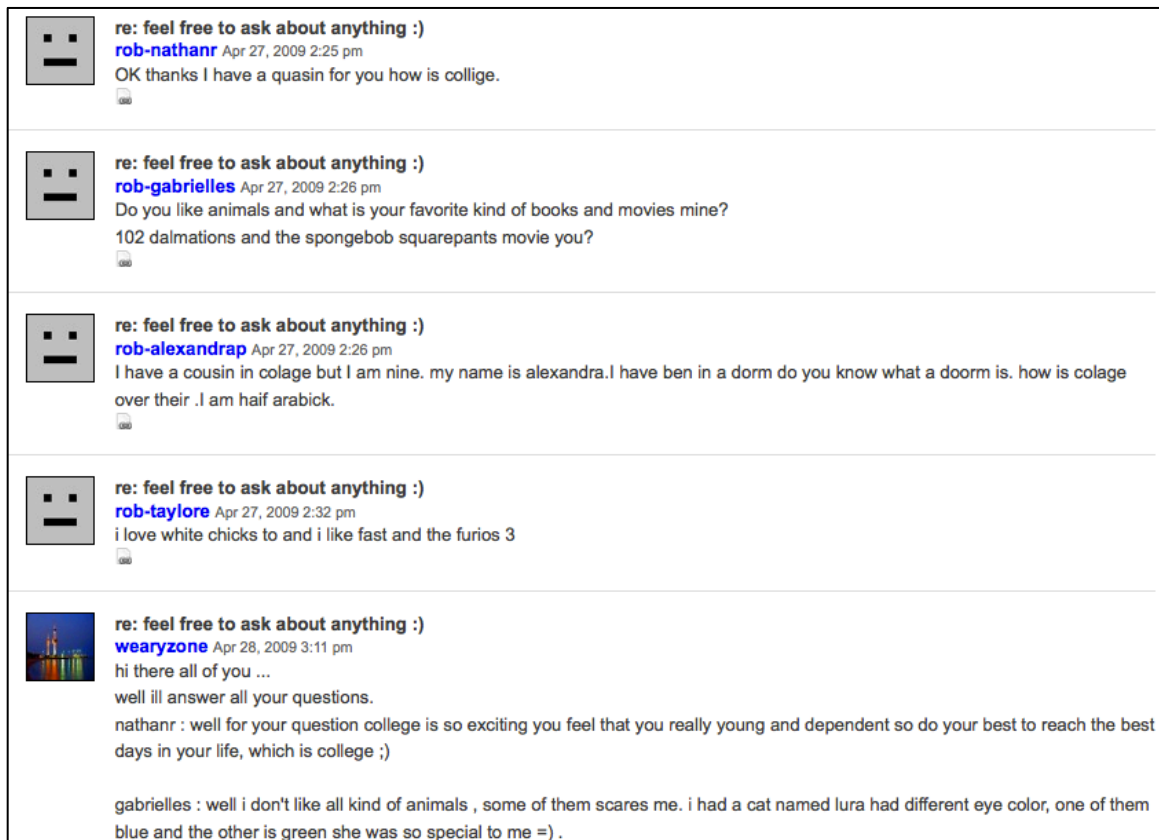
Figure 1. Sample mini-home page

Hello!

Hi, Im Ghalia!
Im a **KU student** and I'm **studying IT** (Information Technology), I also have a **nutrition minor**.
Im **22 years old** yet the youngest of three brothers. ;) Its my **third year in college** and Im expecting to graduate next year hopefully.
A little more details of my life now; I have a **part time job** on campus and i have 5 classes this semester.
I like watching **TV** and **reading**! **I love my computer** and i can spend a whole day on the computer doing lots of things!
I hope this clears things a bit! ;)

The following picture was taken in an old village studio used for acting! Its how old kuwaiti houses looked like!

Most Kuwaiti students posted information about themselves as a means of introduction, using some of the familiar tropes of social networking software like Facebook or MySpace. Many (but not all) students used images to depict themselves; these included a mix of informal family photos and more professional-looking head shots. Fewer students posted images of their country's landmarks and/or cultural traditions such as Kuwait towers and the sword dance. Students included information about hobbies and family members. Several students wrote about themselves in ways that emphasized their international travel experience, their enjoyment of world cuisine, Hollywood movies, and popular music. Some made elaborate use of design elements, including font choices and color to block off particular passages.

Children gained information in interacting with Kuwaiti students. One child asked

about poverty in Kuwait and was informed by a college student that "Kuwait is considered a rich country; it is actually the 8th fattest country in the world." In another exchange, an American child asked about holidays and a Kuwaiti student explained, "I celebrate Islamic holidays and my country's national day hmm also mother's day and sometimes valentines day (I send messages to my family) :)"

Several aspects of the social interaction were highly informal (and even chat-room like) in their demeanor. For example, at 4:39 p.m. on April 29, Samantha posted a note with the title, "Yo!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!:) what up!" and wrote "this is Samantha how is your day going so far? Is it AUSOME OR boring." Within two hours, the Kuwaiti student responded, "Hey Samantha, ;) it was fine, I was studying for a midterm." It not clear how much experience and knowledge these young children have in informal digital communication, but this remains a point of curiosity since an informal digital communication style is likely to be learned in the home in the context of observing the behavior of older siblings or family members.

Children in the three elementary classrooms also experienced the thrill of self-representation as they asked questions and offered information about themselves in the online discussion forum. Figure 2 shows a sample of discussion that reveals the range of responses we observed. As is evident from the figure, children used invented spelling as needed and some writers struggled with composing a well-formed sentence, possibly in their haste to express themselves. Several children demonstrated genuine curiosity in interacting with a young adult. Both Kuwaiti students and U.S. children offered information about themselves and their hobbies and interests. One young student explained that she has a cousin in college, had visited a dorm room, and is "half-arabick." Several asked questions about what college is like.

Figure 2. Sample of online discussion

There were a couple posts to the website that were noteworthy. One student, Taylore, offered an unusual transgressive statement clearly borrowed from his exposure to mass media and popular culture as shown on Figure 2. He wrote:"I like white chicks and the fast and the furious 3." Composed in the elementary school computer lab, it's likely that this student was testing the limits of appropriate home and school discourse, perhaps as a way to impress his friends. This type of in-school transgressive behavior is not unusual among students when popular culture, mass media and digital technologies first enter the context of the classroom (Hobbs, 2011).

Timing, technology, miscommunication and cultural attitudes affected the overall impact of the cultural exchange. Unfortunately, when elementary school teachers were ready to initiate a cross-cultural interaction, Kuwaiti students were on semester break. For all participants, the online software posed some challenges. Indeed, the use of this

particulate type of online software (wikispaces.com) was a novelty for all participants. We learned that a simple list of steps in the process (of how to contribute to a wiki) was not adequate instruction for all participants. Eleven of 38 Kuwaiti students did not participate in the wiki, which we believe may have been due to confusion about how to contribute. Culturally, some Kuwaiti students were hesitant to contribute to the wiki due to feelings of "intruding" into an unfamiliar space--- that of a school-created webpage from a foreign country. However, once they became familiar with the website, Kuwaiti students uploaded photos and contributed writing in ways that the elementary children found fascinating. A review of the wiki shows that there was some meaningful interaction between elementary children and Kuwaiti students. Because Kuwaiti students were writing in their second language (English), the level of communication was perhaps more effective than if we had worked with younger students from Kuwait, who may not have been as skillful in expressing themselves in English.

Interviews with teachers showed that they perceived the pen-pal exchange to be a useful experience. Kuwaiti students themselves were well aware of the negative stereotypes of Middle Eastern people that are common in Hollywood films and on the news. They were eager to position themselves as offering a meaningful counterpoint to these negative stereotypes. They represented themselves as normal teenagers with interests in family, friends, music and popular culture. For them, posting about oneself online is something these students already do on their own social networking websites. But in the context of this project, this action was viewed as a kind of social activism, part of an educational process to help correct the cultural misunderstandings held by American children. Interview data with Kuwaiti students revealed that they felt like they were making a social impact far away, while sitting in their homes and classroom interacting with US elementary children. For most participants, this was the first time they had experienced seeing themselves as engaged in any form of activism. Before this, many Kuwaiti university students did not see themselves as agents for social change.

Discussion

As with any collaboration between university researchers and classroom teachers, teachers' perceptions of the value and relevance of the project are crucial. Some teachers

began the project with some hesitation, wondering at first about the relevance of learning about such a far-away place and such far-away people. The social studies component for Grade 3 students is more likely to focus on children's immediate community, not the countries of the world. In this case, these teachers were teaching about the Middle East for the first time—and they were also using media literacy pedagogy and online technology tools for the first time. This goal was both unique and challenging, in that it asked teachers to learn about several new subjects simultaneously.

The communication exchange between Kuwaiti students and U.S. students revealed some important insights about cultural norms in the use of online social media. As described earlier, we were unable to assess how technically savvy Kuwaiti University students or Grade 3 students were regarding the use of the wiki. Lack of clarity in technical instructions may have slowed the exchange process and caused some bit of frustration for both elementary teachers and Kuwaiti students. In the future, including clear, culturally sensitive instructions with a more user-friendly online tool could help avoid these limitations.

Elementary teachers were not comfortable with classroom talk that activated children's exposure to mass media and popular culture. They made efforts to steer children's conversations to "appropriate topics" including cultural holidays and geography. They were concerned that talk about movies, TV shows, and videogames were too "light" and "informal" to be useful from an educational point of view even those the Kuwaiti students' familiarity with familiar videogames and TV shows was a source of great pleasure to the young children, building a feeling of similarity and identification. Teachers were not comfortable when students used examples from film and television, especially if they were unfamiliar with the references children were making. They also did not encourage children to ask questions about topics related to war, terrorism and violence. Teachers' sensitivity to appropriate content reflects their naturally protective attitudes towards young children.

Because teachers themselves tended to focus on technology as a tool to promote learning, they sometimes devalued the role of student engagement in media production activities. Due to time constraints, some part of the video production activities that should have been student-centered sometimes became teacher-centered. More emphasis on the

value of process learning in student-centered media production projects is needed to support the planning and preparation involved in student media composition work.

As researchers, we struggled with teachers' lack of interest in exploring the representation of current U.S. involvement in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as part of this project. Several times during the course of the project introduced teachers to examples of news stories that we believed were appropriate to discuss with children. During the spring of 2009, news events included multiple reports of suicide bombers and roadside bombs killing both Iraqi civilians and U.S. soldiers. In Afghanistan, reports of bombings occurred nearly every day and local women political leaders and schools for girls were targeted for attack. Teachers acknowledged that the topics of terrorism, war and violence occasionally entered classroom conversations. Although researchers could see that children were curious to learn more about the status of the wars, teachers were uncomfortable with these conversations. Researchers wanted teachers to share and discuss some examples of war and terrorism in the local and national news, for example. When asked to explain their lack of interest in using news, teachers acknowledged that fear was a factor in their disinclination, since the community residents were politically diverse. Teachers were concerned that children would simply offer up opinions heard in their homes and that such dialogue would be polarizing. In this community, parents were divided politically, according to teachers. They were equally likely to support or disapprove of U.S. military involvement in the Middle East.

As this paper has shown, there are a number of benefits in connecting university students in Kuwait with elementary children in the United States as a means to combat stereotypes and promote global understanding of the Middle East. But we also recognize that some aspects of classroom culture may create limitations for the practice of using online social media as tools for classroom use. By the time children enter elementary school, many already have some preconceived ideas and attitudes about other cultures that are influenced by their families, friends, and communities (Montgomery, 2000). Since American children are born and raised in a media-saturated society, an important source of information from which they learn about other cultures is the mass media, popular culture and online digital media for social interaction. Fortunately, an increasing number of educators are beginning to experiment with using digital media resources in

shaping students' knowledge and perceptions. Future research is needed to continue to explore how media production experiences with online social media can be used as a means to recognize and resist stereotypical representations of people and cultures.

Acknowledgements

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