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Shaina Adams-El Guiabli

University of Pennsylvania

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This paper explores the use of mass media technologies in classroom curriculum through the example of a collaborative project between Constitution High School in Philadelphia, PA and Marefat High School in Kabul, Afghanistan. This project is examined as an example of south-south cooperation utilizing mass media technologies and students’ embodied experiences as tools for participatory engagement and collective intelligence around the concepts of citizenship and democracy. Additionally, this article provides suggestions for further investigation of the impact of this project on program participants with an emphasis on methodological limitations and issues for consideration. Projects such as this, with the utilization of mass media technologies, have the potential to bring together seemingly disparate communities and to raise the voices of young members of those communities to share their knowledge, resources, and expertise.

Introduction

Skepticism around the value of mass media technologies in the classroom abounds. While this is certainly not a new debate, the weight of arguments against technology, often citing that students are learning less as their access to technology increases, appear all the more problematic in an increasingly media-centered world. While methods for effectively incorporating media technologies, and the literacies supporting them, into the classroom are still largely in development, there are many exciting and useful examples illustrating the ways in which mass media can be utilized in formal schooling. It is important to draw on these examples, particularly as the dominance of mass media as a resource in our lives continues to grow. When we, as educators, are able to work with mass media as a tool to encourage creativity, cooperation, and learning, classroom spaces can become more dynamic and engaging.

In this paper, I will explore the use of mass media technologies in classroom curriculum through the example of a collaborative project (“Being We the People”) between Constitution High School in Philadelphia, PA and Marefat High School in Kabul, Afghanistan. Started as a means to creatively engage and empower students as activists and community leaders, this project developed around a shared curriculum of human rights, democracy and social justice. The “Being We the People” project was formulated around a multi-modal program that involved classroom instruction, photojournalism, interactive community museum exhibits,

and intercultural dialogue. Through this paper, I will explore this project as an example of *south-south cooperation* utilizing mass media technologies and students' embodied experiences as tools for participatory engagement around the notions of citizenship and democracy, and in particular will analyze how the students created a collective intelligence around these concepts and whether this provided support for the overarching project goals.

Conceptual Framework

South-South Cooperation

South-south cooperation refers to collaboration and exchange between global south communities in such areas as economics, development, and education. While the terms "global south" and "global north" were originally used to differentiate between developed (global north) and developing (global south) countries, they have since become more nuanced and focus on the inequalities, power differentials and disparities that exist between communities, even communities within the same country (Chisholm, 2009). Therefore, a sub-community within the United States, a country that would traditionally be labeled as a member of the global north, could be labeled as a global south community if it holds a disadvantaged position as compared to other communities in the United States. No longer is south-south cooperation limited to countries labeled under the traditional umbrella of the global south, but rather it has grown to encompass cooperation between globally disadvantaged communities no matter their geographical affiliation.

Cooperation between global south communities occurs in many forms including economic trade, development, education, and policy strategies. Given the potential benefits of south-south cooperation, the United Nations developed the Special Unit for South-South Cooperation in 1978 in order to "promote, coordinate and support South-South and triangular cooperation on a Global and United Nations system-wide basis" (United Nations Development Program, 2010). This Special Unit promotes partnership and dialogue between southern communities in terms of policy, development projects, and education exchange. Underlying this work is an emphasis on the ways in which south-south cooperation can empower communities that share similar positions of inequality in the global community to share knowledge, ideas, and resources.

Examples of south-south educational cooperation include programs that send Cuban teachers to Jamaica and Namibia to fill positions and share education policy and practice knowledge (Hickling-Hudson, 2004). Rather than requesting aid in the form of teachers from northern, developed countries, Jamaica and Namibia received teachers from a partner southern country, facilitating knowledge and resource-sharing through south-south cooperation. Another example is the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), an organization started in rural Bangladesh that now operates projects across the developing world. Founded on a model of international sharing across the global south, BRAC now facilitates micro-finance programs and supports southern communities in starting schools under their Non-Formal Primary Education model (Chabott, 2009). As will be illustrated below, the "Being We the People" project is another example of south-south cooperation, using education as a means of connecting and empowering traditionally misrepresented

communities. This project is based on newer definitions of the global south, pairing two groups of students from different geographical locations who share a common identity as members of the global south in terms of being marginalized from their larger communities, as will be discussed below.

Situating the Project: Participatory Culture

The “Being We the People” project capitalizes on a participatory culture framework to encourage student collaboration and cooperation. This approach is well-suited for this project in particular as an effort to promote south-south cooperation, because of the ways in which it gives voice to these often misrepresented minority communities. Through the various technologies incorporated in the project, students and global audience members were encouraged to participate in online and museum-based media, not only as passive observers but as active co-creators of knowledge. Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton, and Robison (2009) provide a useful framework from which to frame the “Being We the People” project as one promoting a participatory culture. In particular, they write that a participatory culture is one with:

1. Relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement,
2. Strong support for creating and sharing creations with others,
3. Some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed on to others,
4. Members who believe that their contributions matter, and
5. Members who feel some degree of social connection with one another. (Jenkins et al., 2009, pp. 5-6)

In the analysis that follows, I will explore the ways in which various aspects of the “Being We the People” project supported participatory culture in an effort to fulfill its mission as a south-south cooperative project supporting the exchange of ideas between disempowered communities.

Learning through Embodied Experiences

As the “Being We the People” project is built on the principles of south-south cooperation and seeks to promote shared learning and a participatory culture among the participants, Gee’s theory of learning through embodied experiences will be the primary theoretical framework through which I conduct my analysis. Gee (2007) writes that the human mind learns through a process of storing experiences, which are later compared to one another to formulate patterns, connections and associations between lived experiences. Additionally, “humans don’t just store experiences in their minds ‘as is.’ Rather, they edit them according to their interests, values, goals, and sociocultural memberships” (p. 71). These embodied experiences help people to make decisions about how to proceed in new or unfamiliar situations, as well as to decipher why something might be occurring in a particular way. As a theory of learning, Gee encourages a unique form of classroom instruction and interaction where the embodied experiences of the students are a fundamental aspect of the learning process. Rather than a

classroom focused only on rote memorization and forced knowledge standards, this theory encourages the creation of a learning environment that is relevant to the unique experiences of each student.

As Gee (2007) writes, people “think best when they reason on the basis of patterns they have picked up through their actual experiences in the world, patterns that, over time, can become generalized but that are still rooted in specific areas of embodied experience” (p. 9). In traditional learning environments, students are typically asked to memorize facts through school-constructed rules of logic. Gee points out that this forced knowledge does not empower students to engage with materials from their own experiences nor does it encourage students to recognize patterns between what they are learning and what they have experienced in their lives. The material that students are often asked to memorize as “truth” and “reality” only reflect the realities of some students, while leaving many students feeling that the knowledge they are being asked to accept isn’t relevant to their life experiences. When instead the mode of instruction and curriculum are relevant to the embodied experiences of the students, they will be more likely to engage with the material and to make long-term learning connections. Under this type of learning and teaching, students are fully engaged in the process of learning, making associations between the material presented and applicable elements of their own lived experiences. Therefore, the classroom becomes a space in which students are actively participating in the learning process, bringing their unique perspectives in line with curricular goals.

Research Questions

In this analysis I focus on two questions: 1) how does student interaction and learning occur through the participatory culture of the “Being We the People” project?, and 2) in what ways does the “Being We the People” project foster learning through embodied experiences in order to build a knowledge base that is relevant for the lives of students? These questions emphasize notions of collective intelligence and experiential relevance for student learning.

Research Sites and Methods

The Project: “Being We the People”

In 2009, a project was launched through a Museums and Community Collaborations Abroad grant, funded through a partnership of the U.S. Department of State and the American Association of Museums, bringing together students from Constitution High School and Marefat High School in a photography-focused exhibit highlighting their communities. The mission of this project was to bring together:

...two schools predominantly comprised of minority students, in two vastly different locales—Center City Philadelphia, and the outskirts of Kabul—in order to give seldom-heard members of society a voice at national venues. Visitors to the simultaneous exhibits were shown what being “We the People” looks like to young minority citizens—in an established democracy, and in one emerging from decades of war. (National Constitution Center, n.d.)

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Tied into established curriculum built into the schools around democracy, civic engagement, and human rights, the project provided an additional focus on themes derived from the U.S. Constitution and the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (National Constitution Center, 2009). Students at both schools were provided with digital cameras, camcorders, and computers and were trained on the use of these mass media tools in order to document their lives and their perspective on themes around “Being We the People” (National Constitution Center, n.d.).

The project centered around a photography exhibit that was simultaneously launched in May 2010 at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia and the National Museum in Kabul (National Constitution Center, n.d.). Additionally, the students kept blogs related to this experience, participated in online conversation through Shutterfly®, were interviewed by several media outlets, and had the opportunity to meet one another when the students from Marefat visited Philadelphia in May 2010. I was initially introduced to this project when my employer was invited by the National Constitution Center to host the Marefat and Constitution High School students in our center for a discussion about their project, civic engagement, and activism.⁸

South-South Partners: Constitution High School and Marefat High School

The “Being We the People” project brought together two global south communities through the partnership of two high schools in different countries, linked by similarities in terms of demographics, school focus, and curricular goals.

Constitution High School.

This high school is located in the Old City section of Philadelphia, only a few blocks from the National Constitution Center and Independence Hall. The mission of Constitution High School illustrates the connections between the curriculum and the school’s strategic location in the city:

Constitution High School is a unique collaboration among the School District of Philadelphia, the National Constitution Center and the Gilder-Lehrman Institute of American History. By engaging students with an appreciation for history and an understanding of the democratic principles embodied in the United States Constitution, this college preparatory high school will develop the next generation of engaged citizens and civic leaders in government, public policy, and law. (Constitution High School, 2011)

The vision of Constitution High School also reflects this mission by citing a focus on knowledge of history, active citizenship, and democratic deliberation. As such, all students are required to participate in service-learning projects through the school, to engage in community service outside of school, and to take two social science courses every year. Additionally, students are exposed to issues around democracy and active citizenship through the maintenance of a close relationship with the National Constitution Center, field trips (including opportunities for

⁸ The views and analysis presented in this paper are in no way a reflection of those of my employer. This paper and analysis are written from my point of view as an independent author.

study abroad), historical exhibits at the school, and visiting scholar lectures (Constitution High School, 2011).

Demographically, Constitution High School serves a small student body of approximately 400 students (Constitution High School, 2011), the majority of whom (63.9%) are African-American, while 19.1% are white, 10.2% are Latino, and 4.7% are Asian (The School District of Philadelphia, 2011). Additionally, the website states that 73.2% of students at Constitution High School are considered economically disadvantaged, as estimated by the number of students who would qualify for free or reduced-price lunches (The School District of Philadelphia, 2011). While applicants to the school come from across the city of Philadelphia, the majority of students enrolled are economically disadvantaged African-American students, signifying that this is a school with a primary population of traditionally disenfranchised groups in the United States.

Marefat High School.

The Marefat School was started in 1994 in an Afghan refugee camp in Pakistan serving people mainly from the Hazara ethnic minority group who had fled civil war (Marefat High School, n.d.). In 2002, after the arrival of U.S. troops in Afghanistan and the ousting of the Taliban, the Marefat school moved to Kabul, “where it grew into a two-building complex with 3,150 students, more than 30 classrooms, and two computer labs” (National Constitution Center, n.d.). As a community-based school, much of the funding for Marefat High School comes from local and international donations, USAID, the British Council, and the American University of Afghanistan. Much like Constitution High School, the curriculum of Marefat focuses on human rights, humanism, women’s rights, democracy, civic education and social justice, and students are encouraged to participate in community engagement activities (Marefat High School, n.d.; National Constitution Center, n.d.).

Marefat has particularly focused efforts on educating women through such initiatives as an Accelerated Learning Program for older girls and women who were previously unable to complete their formal schooling under the Taliban (Marefat High School, n.d.). In addition, the activism and civil engagement of the women and girls of Marefat has received international attention. In 2009, in the midst of the “Being We the People” project, *The New York Times* published an article detailing protests being led by Afghan women against new laws that increased the subjugation of women in society through such means as legalizing marital rape (Filkins, 2009). Many of the students of Marefat High School, with the active support of their teachers, attended the protests to show their outrage toward the new laws.

In addition to the subjugation that women of this community face because of their gender, there is an added layer of persecution because many are also of the Hazara ethnic minority, an historically disenfranchised group. The Hazara have faced persecution on many levels, historically allowed only to work as servants and treated as a sub-human class in Afghan society (Oppel, Jr. & Wafa, 2010). Reports also indicate the massacre of Hazara people by former Taliban rulers (Human Rights Watch, 2001). A legacy such as this makes places like Marefat High School a refuge for Hazara people, providing an environment in which this global south community can thrive in terms of education, women’s rights, and civic participation.

Methods

Data collection.

The “Being We the People” project utilized a multimodal media framework to produce several spaces of interaction and knowledge-creation, including virtual dialogue communities, museum gallery exhibits, and project websites. In each space, participants were asked to engage beyond text alone, incorporating photos, words, video, and interactive dialogue. As Gee (2007) writes, one important principle of learning in digital spaces is the “Multimodal Principle,” that, “meaning and knowledge are built up through various modalities (images, words, symbols, interactions, abstract designs, sounds, etc.) not just words” (p. 106). The multimodality of this project allowed students to move beyond traditional schooling practices of rote memorization and the reading of text alone, and to actively engage with the concepts under consideration.

The focus of data collection for this analysis is limited to two aspects of the project: the Shutterfly® site, where photos were uploaded and conversations were conducted between participants, and the “Being We the People” website housed by the National Constitution Center, where the final photo pairings are on display and site visitors can view and recommend pairings, read the captions, and upload their own photographs. The two sites provide data on different aspects of the project, with the Shutterfly® site primarily utilized as a photo-sharing hub and space for dialogue between the students, and the “Being We the People” website primarily serving as an online gallery of the museum exhibit photographs, pairings, and captions. Though data was selected from two public sources, the names of the students used in the data samples below have been changed to protect their anonymity.

Data analysis.

In my analysis of the “Being We the People” project, I will focus particularly on situating this project within the framework of Gee’s theory of learning through embodied experiences. Within the parameters of the project assignment, in alignment with their classroom curriculum, the students were asked to

use photography to explore how minorities in different types of democracies perceive themselves as citizens, and how they define the concept of citizenship. Students are guided by seven themes, which they can interpret how they choose. The themes are: work, religion, participation, expression, commerce, myself. (Being We the People, 2009)

I will focus my data analysis and discussion on an examination of the ways in which student commentary and reflection, as displayed through the Shutterfly® and “Being We the People” sites, coincide with Gee’s theory of learning through embodied experiences. In particular, I will examine the connections between the program curriculum and the students’ connections of project themes to their embodied experiences.

Findings and Discussion

Creating a Participatory Culture

Implications of participatory culture.

The participatory culture created through this project had several implications for the ways in which students interacted, created knowledge, and engaged with curriculum around human rights and democracy. As Jenkins et al. (2009) write, “participatory culture offers many opportunities for youths to engage in civic debates, participate in community life, and even become political leaders” (p. 12). For the students participating in the “Being We the People” project, the participatory culture created opportunities to explore thematic curriculum through sharing and dialogue, and provided a platform for civic engagement. As will be discussed below, this project was built around a participatory culture framework which highlighted the collective intelligence of the participants and provided a grounding from which students learned from one another’s embodied experiences.

Building a collective intelligence.

The participatory culture created through this project also offered the opportunity for students to build knowledge through a collective intelligence supported by mass media technologies. Given that a fundamental goal of south-south cooperation is to share ideas and information with a core belief in the value of all participants’ knowledge, the collective intelligence created by the “Being We the People” project was an important point of focus for the project. As Jenkins et al. (2009) write, collective intelligence focuses on the fact that “everyone knows something, nobody knows everything, and what any one person knows can be tapped by the group as a whole” (p. 72). Additionally, the authors describe the ways in which collective intelligence offers an alternative to power differentials and knowledge hierarchy, instead emphasizing the value of everyone’s input to create an intellectual whole. The “Being We the People” project invites collective intelligence through the sharing of information and dialogue on the Shutterfly® account as well as through the photo pairings. As will be discussed below, through this project, the students collectively answered what “Being We the People” means in their lives, engaging in the creation of a collective intelligence through a participatory process.

Learning through Embodied Experiences

Minority identity.

Through the tools of mass media communication based largely around a Shutterfly® account as well as photojournalism, the students engaged in collective knowledge-building around the themes of democracy and citizenship through the lens of minority identities. The students participating in the project knew relatively little about one another before beginning the project. “Being We the People” provided a platform from which students in the United States and Afghanistan could engage

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with one another as minority students from their respective communities, build knowledge around curriculum themes, and dispel misconceptions.

The Shutterfly® platform was an initial point of contact for project participants, and through this, the students were able to introduce themselves, their goals for the project, and their ideas around citizenship and democracy. In introducing themselves and their goals as participants in the project through the Shutterfly® site, *Being We the People* (2009), many students echoed one another in a desire to learn more about cultures with which they were largely unfamiliar:

Zemar: The program is a partnership between our two schools in Kabul and Philadelphia. This will help us getting a first-hand picture of each other.

Yasir: I think this program is good opportunity for explaining the people's life, culture, ideas, works, relationships, etc. and this is our job to explain the life of our people to the other people of the world and other people should introduce themselves to us.

Zalmai: At the end of my note, I would like to once again admit that this project is a really great opportunity for every one of us either in Afghanistan or in America to design a picture of our respective societies to the other side and I hope every body be successful in this mission.

Muna: Through my photos and paintings I speak to the world about myself, my people, my culture and my society.

Luis: We are on the frontline of understanding for both our cultures.

Additionally, the students expressed that it was important to dispel many of the stereotypes and common portrayals of their minority communities:

Hidi: By the way the photos which we take are a little effort of us that show our daily life and a branch of our people's mind. I hope that we can bring an alter to your image of our land that you all have got from media only.

Zemar: I admit that my present picture from the States is that taken roughly from the movies and some books. I am sure it will be much otherwise when we go ahead and make communications and interactions with our fellow Americans.

Muna: The world remembers and knows Afghanistan by the pictures of war and agonies. I think it is enough now.

Gzifa: Some times when the world watches Afghanistan behind the cheek of poverty, suicide, fighting, and zealotry, I think the real picture of my country is not reflected fairly.

Given that it was predominantly the students from Afghanistan who shared this sentiment on the Shutterfly® account, this may have been a particularly salient goal for those students.

In another phase of the project, the students took photos of their daily lives as reflections of their associations between these visual images and the project themes of democracy and citizenship. The photos became an opportunity for students to share a visual image of their embodied experiences of democracy and citizenship from their own identity-driven and geographical contexts. In some cases, the photos and accompanying captions reflected the students' pre-conceived notions and assumptions of one another's realities. One example of this is a photo taken by a student from Philadelphia, Breanna, that shows a young woman wearing a hijab sitting alone in a room reading from a book. The accompanying caption reads:

The story is a girl focusing on her education. In Afghanistan they don't have the opportunity to do that. Although we both are Muslim, we are Muslim in different ways and we think differently. Many people believe girls cannot go to school because they are girls and not the men of the houses. But here she's working on her education to better herself and her future. (National Constitution Center, n.d.)

Here, Breanna uses the photo to illustrate her embodied experiences around Muslim girls' educational opportunities. When Breanna writes about the opportunities that girls in Afghanistan have, she does not explicitly state from where she received this information. However, it can be assumed that much of her knowledge about the lives of women in Afghanistan has been received through various media resources. Breanna associates the image that she has received about the lack of Muslim women's educational opportunities in Afghanistan with this photo, and juxtaposes that image with a photo of a Muslim girl from Philadelphia who is "focusing on her education."

Though the photo is of a girl from Philadelphia, Breanna's caption focuses on girls in Afghanistan and the opportunities that they are not afforded, evidenced by the fact that she writes very little about Philadelphia specifically. Thus, the photo showcases her embodied notion of girls' education in both Philadelphia and Afghanistan. For Breanna, there is a clear distinction between the life of a Muslim girl in Philadelphia and a Muslim girl in Afghanistan: they are afforded different opportunities for education, something that she attributes to them being "Muslim in different ways and we think differently." In this way, she creates and highlights an internal dialogue about the differences between herself as a Muslim from Philadelphia and her Muslim peers in Afghanistan, and her evaluation of those differences. Given that Breanna had not yet met the students from Marefat when this photo was taken, it would be an interesting follow-up to examine whether or not she was able to gather new information, based on the first-hand experience of her peers from Afghanistan, when they met in Philadelphia.

In another example, the students utilized the opportunity to take photos of their communities to counter common misconceptions about their respective

countries. Here, Ajani describes a photograph of a multi-level mall in Kabul through the caption accompanying the photo:

This is the biggest mall and hotel in Kabul. It has seven floors. Floors one through four are shops and stores, and floors five through seven are hotel rooms. Everything in this mall is expensive, and only wealthy people shop there. It is located in Shahr-e-Naow, which is now known as downtown Kabul. (National Constitution Center, n.d.)

Ajani describes the fact that this mall is only accessible to shoppers of the wealthy elite, thus utilizing the photograph to illustrate his embodied experience of who is given access to this space and who is not.

It is interesting to note that the students participating in the project chose to pair this image with one taken by Crystal. In her image, Crystal photographed a residential street in Philadelphia, empty of people, but highlighting the urban infrastructure of her neighborhood. Crystal’s caption accompanying the photo read:

I was walking down my street one afternoon, and started to notice similarities between the conditions of the streets of Kabul and my own. I saw old, decaying bricks, cracked cement, and wire fences with barbed wire. Television tends to portray Americans in a nice, upper-middle class house, in a neighborhood where people can leave their doors open. I wanted to give the viewer a better look at my neighborhood and not the stereotype. (National Constitution Center, n.d.)

Crystal specifically references the fact that this photograph is an embodiment of the images she has seen of Kabul with “decaying...cracked” buildings, and that this photograph represents a connection between her neighborhood and those images she has received of Afghanistan. Additionally, she writes that this photograph is an artistic expression of the fact that the way that neighborhoods are portrayed in the United States is not a reflection of her lived reality. The embodied associations that Crystal notes about American neighborhoods on television is that of an “upper-middle class” existence. Those associations are not Crystal’s reality, and this photograph is an opportunity for her to share her experience of daily life. The students participating in the project selected the photographs of Ajani and Crystal to be paired in the exhibit on display in Philadelphia and Kabul. Through this photographic pairing, the students were echoing the importance of learning through sharing lived realities, while also placing emphasis on the importance of challenging and complicating misperceptions.

Citizenship, democracy, and human rights.

Through the Shutterfly® account, the students centered their dialogue around the project themes of citizenship and democracy, but appeared particularly interested in focusing on human rights. This trend of linking human rights to democracy and citizenship carried into images that they photographed and selected for pairing in the exhibits. One student, Luis, posed the following questions to his peers from Afghanistan: “What is your opinion on the Taliban and the War on Terrorism? Do you think its [sic] right or is it wrong?” (Being We the

People, 2009). This question illustrates the genuine interest that the students were taking in creating a collective intelligence around complex issues. One student, Zemar, responded to Luis by stating:

Taliban is not just a threat for Afghanistan, but for every nation in the world that is why they have to be defeated, and I think this is the interest of all those who participate in the war. War itself for tackling a group like Taliban is not wrong, but ways we select as are called strategies can be right or wrong and effective or not effective. (Being We the People, 2009)

Here, Zemar begins to critically examine the complexities of war and its effects on the people who are caught in the crossfire. Luis also requests that the students from Afghanistan take photographs of the effects of the war, indicating his desire to more fully understand the issues faced by his peers through a photographic representation of their lived reality and embodied experiences.

Several of the photos submitted by the students from Afghanistan directly connect to Luis's request and illustrate the complexities of the war and the dismantling of the Taliban. This is a particularly salient issue for the Afghan students as members of the minority Hazara community that faced heavy persecution under the Taliban. One example of this is a photo submitted by Hidi depicting two men reconstructing a home, shown tossing a brick across a wall under construction. Her caption reads, "Since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, many Afghan refugees have returned to Afghanistan and can afford to construct new homes" (National Constitution Center, n.d.). This photo represents several embodied experiences for Hidi: the destruction of homes due to bombings and war, the displacement of Afghan refugees under years of war, the fall of the Taliban and subsequent return of the refugees, and the re-construction of her community. The connection between this photograph and the Shutterfly® conversation between Luis and Zemar illustrates the students' engagement around issues of warfare, human rights and their understandings of community development.

For the exhibit, the students voted to pair this photograph with one taken by Philadelphia student Tiffany depicting a group of schoolmates lined up in a gymnasium tossing basketballs back and forth to a partner across from them. Tiffany wrote in the caption:

In this picture, I was in gym class. Usually when you have gym class, it's in a gym, but not in our school. We don't have a gym, so we have gym class in the lunch room. This image is important to me because it's one of the times we have to work together as a team. If one person messed up, everyone had to start over. Lately in my school government there has been division over positions and power. This picture reminds me of how when you work together it's much better. (National Constitution Center, n.d.)

Tiffany's photograph and caption speak directly to notions related to democracy, civic engagement, and cooperation. She writes about the ways that this photograph represents other embodied experiences she holds around democracy, namely that there have been issues of power struggles in the school government. She connects the photograph depicting teamwork with the importance of working together in democratic environments. By pairing the photographs by Tiffany and

Hidi, the student participants are also illustrating collective knowledge-building around the notion of democracy: a burgeoning democracy in Afghanistan, represented by the photograph of the rebuilding of community, and lessons from democratic principles from the United States poignantly reflected in the play of school children.

The students also engaged in discussions about the complexities surrounding inequality and human rights, and carried these virtual conversations into their photojournalism projects. Through the Shutterfly® account, students William (Philadelphia) and Zemar (Afghanistan) engaged in a discussion about the connections between democracy and human rights, initiated by a question posed by Zemar asking what her peers think of democracy and its relationship to human rights. William responds by stating, “I think that Democracy and Human Rights go hand in hand. One cannot possibly exist without the other. A democracy, being a government ran by people, has to have laws that maintain, define, outline, respect and value the people’s rights” (Being We the People, 2009). Here, the students are collectively creating knowledge around the complex relationship between human rights and democracy, directly related to their curriculum goals.

One example of the connections that students noted through photographs and photo pairings of the relationship between human rights and democracy came from the pairing of photos by Ajani and Luis. Ajani photographed a group of people, many of whom were young children, standing at a ditch filling water canisters. The caption accompanying this photo reads:

This is an image of the water problem in Afshar, a mountainous area northwest of Kabul. Residents of this area are Hazara, a large ethnic minority in Afghanistan. They do not have access to water in their houses which is why come to this place to carry water away in barrels and casks. (National Constitution Center, n.d.)

This photograph was selected to pair with one taken by Luis. Luis’ photo, taken in Philadelphia, shows the meat section of a grocery store, empty of people but abundant with food. The photo caption reads:

The market was so full of food, but empty of people. There are all kinds of high-grade meats, veal, pork, beef, but no one buying it. In Afghanistan, there are people looking for food, but there isn’t as much as there is here, so it’s the reverse of this photo. This represents how I feel we have a lot of stuff, and it is important for people to share. (National Constitution Center, n.d.)

In selecting these photos for pairing, the students are juxtaposing abundance and scarcity with regard to two human rights: food and water. For the students, these photos embody representations of human rights injustices through the depiction of unequal resources. Luis’ photo caption illustrates the fact that his photo was a response to the photo taken by his peer from Afghanistan, Ajani. Conceivably, for Luis and the other students who selected this pairing, the juxtaposition of scarcity and abundance eloquently illustrated their embodied understanding of the connection between human rights and democracy.

Conclusions

The photo pairings, photo captions, and Shutterfly® commentary represent a process of learning through embodied experiences. The students recognized patterns in their environment referencing the thematic curriculum of citizenship and democracy, and then created photo representations of those embodied experiences. Through this process, students explored complicated terminology, and engaged with one another in building knowledge around these themes, potentially creating a deeper understanding of the curriculum. In this way, the “Being We the People” project moves beyond a traditional style of learning and instead encourages students to explore the materials with which they are working from their own perspective and that of their project partners. By learning to value their own contributions to the knowledge-building process, and by understanding the value of the contributions of their peers, the students were engaged in a cooperative learning environment.

Though this project is not without challenges and questions for further consideration, as will be explored below, it is an example of the use of mass media technologies to build relationships between communities, create a collaborative learning environment, and strengthen participatory culture. The students engaged in this project interacted with people that they may have otherwise never met, learning about each other’s environments, cultural identities, and building collective knowledge around the themes of citizenship and democracy.

In south-south cooperative projects such as “Being We the People,” particularly with geographical distances that can impede traditional forms of communication and collaboration, media tools become an effective resource for strengthening this development framework. As Black (2008) notes:

New media, ICTs, and mindsets afford opportunities to expand classroom learning beyond the boundaries of the school walls, into other personal, professional, and academic domains in ways that will facilitate student knowledge of multiple modes of meaning-making, access, participation, affiliation, learning, and success in a globalized, networked society. (p. 47)

The “Being We the People” project gave students from two global south communities the technological skills and tools to engage with one another. Projects such as this, with the utilization of mass media technologies, have the potential to bring together seemingly disparate communities and to raise the voices of young members of those communities to share their knowledge, resources, and expertise. “Being We the People” gave a space and a voice for these young students and enhanced their schooling framework in multiple, positive ways.

Areas for Further Examination

Methodological considerations.

As this is a working paper analyzing the “Being We the People” project, it is important to note the ways in which a further examination of various aspects of this project could be beneficial. For the purposes of this analysis, data sources

were focused around publicly-accessible websites. This was in large part a way to limit the scope of the project, but also influenced by accessibility to other data. If given permission by the students and staff at the partner institutions, it would be interesting and useful to analyze other aspects of the project and to gather data from primary sources such as interviews. As will be described below, there are multiple aspects of this project that would be important areas for follow-up through future research projects. These areas for further examination would help to create a more thorough and detailed analysis of the strengths and areas for improvement of this project, as well as serve as a tool for potential replication by other partner agencies.

Measuring learning outcomes.

One area for further exploration would be an analysis of the impact of the project on the students (and potentially their communities) through an examination of the assessment of learning goals and outcomes. It would be useful to have access to information about the precise learning goals of the curriculum, as well as the learning goals for the partnership between the students through the project. Measuring these goals against other project data sources, such as assessment surveys, interviews, and analyses of the conversations between students through virtual communities, would be a useful exercise for evaluating the effectiveness of the project.

Continuing connections.

A major goal of south-south partnerships is creating a relationship that is sustainable and meaningful; therefore, another area to explore in further detail is how this project impacted student interactions over the long-term. On the Shutterfly® account, for example, the last student activity was a post made in April 2010, leading to questions as to whether or not there has been continued student interaction. Perhaps the students are communicating through other technology resources, such as Facebook or Skype. Many of their posts on the Shutterfly® (2009) account indicate a strong relationship between the students, such as one student writing:

Hey everyone this is rene and i just wanted to say that the experience that i had when the afghanistan kids is one that i will treasure forever an ever. they where all kind and inviting to us all. Its not an exageration to say that they left with great sadness and tears for they're departure. they came with so much and left with so much more. A family because thats what we became.

It would be useful to follow up with the students and administrators of this project and to inquire about the level of continued partnership and correspondence. Additionally, if the students have not remained in contact with one another or if the partner institutions have not continued their connection, it would be useful to evaluate the reasons for this and how this might impact the students, communities, and potential project replication.

Power and intervention.

It is important to acknowledge that while south-south cooperation was a critical component of this project, several aspects of the project may have been indicative of a north-south-south cooperation, including funding and administrative intervention. The project was funded by a grant from institutions in the United States, a global north country. Stipulations of the project were certainly guided by the grant, which ultimately provided the economic support for the endeavor. Much discussion within development discourse exists around the interventions of the global north in south-south cooperative projects. Often, when the global north intervenes in terms of financing or strategy, the project is no longer directed by southern communities as the primary knowledge contributors. For the purposes of an analysis of this project, a useful follow-up investigation would explore issues of power inherent in the project framework and analyze whether or not this impacted student learning and engagement.

Certainly the project participants of “Being We the People,” as global south communities, would have faced many challenges in collaborating with one another had there not been intervention from the global north: they would have faced financial obstacles, as well as technological and geographical barriers. In conducting follow-up analyses of this project, it would be important to further examine these interventions and power dynamics and to have discussions with those intimately involved in the project about the impact of these issues. An overarching goal for follow-up analysis, and an important component of ascertaining the sustainability of this work, would be to conduct interviews and/or focus groups with the students involved about the impact of this project on their lives, the connections they built with their peers, and the knowledge that they gained through this collaboration. Ultimately, this project will maintain a more sustainable impact if the students feel that they actively contributed to the knowledge-building process, as the information would then be directed by their experiences and ideas.

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Shaina Adams-El Guabli is a master's student in intercultural communication at the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education. Her research interests lie at the intersection of international education and identity formation. Email: ashaina@upenn.edu

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