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Literacy as social (media) practice: Refugee youth and native language literacy at school

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Abstract

Teachers often struggle to find ways to use their refugee students' native languages in ways that encourage the development of the native language as well as academic language and literacy in the new language. This project examined how a critical literacy curriculum unit, which used Facebook as a tool for interaction and publishing student work, served as a context for native language and English literacy development. Participants were adolescent newcomers from the Horn of Africa with limited or interrupted formal schooling experiences. As transnationals, most used social media to interact with others locally and globally, in multiple languages, oral and written. Findings illustrate the various ways that native languages are used across social and academic purposes in the classroom, and the ways in which culture is delimited in the instruction and by youth. Implications for educators include discussion of in-class use of social media analysis to achieve multilingual and (critical) literacy learning aims.

A wide and deep body of research indicates that students' native languages can promote additional language learning, the development of content knowledge and skills, and literacy acquisition (e.g., Cummins 2000). The maintenance and development of two or more languages over time is associated with multiple academic, linguistic, and cognitive advantages for individuals (Bialystok, 2007). Numerous, large-scale studies indicate that students who have the opportunity to develop and maintain their native languages outperform their peers in monolingual programs on measures of both English language literacy and content knowledge (Thomas & Collier, 1997, 2002; Krashen & McField, 2005).

For adolescent students with interrupted/limited formal schooling, the value of native language instruction is potentially even greater. One of the few large-scale analyses of adolescent and adult refugee learners found that use of students' native languages in instruction was associated with faster growth in English reading comprehension and oral communication skills (Condelli, Spruck Wrigley & Yoon, 2008). Overall, the literature on adult second language reading indicates that instruction that strengthens native language reading skills positively impacts the development of second language reading skills (Carlo & Skilton-Sylvester, 1996).

Policy and Informed Pedagogy

In light of the empirical evidence supporting the use of students' native language, the U.S. state of Minnesota recently passed the Learning English for Academic Proficiency and Success (LEAPS) Act (H.F. 2397). This 2014 law frames multilingualism as an asset for all Minnesota students and sets a high bar for native language support for English language learners. The legislation challenges educators to use the students' native languages as a resource in English language and literacy development, and to use culturally and linguistically relevant teaching to inspire learning. During the same legislative session, Section 37 of Minnesota Statutes 2012 (Section 124D.59) was amended to include and define a new category of English learner: Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFE).

While many educators of multilingual students embrace the idea that students' native languages are assets, it is often challenging to incorporate students' native languages into their instruction (Karabenick & Noda, 2004). A common first step is for teachers to establish linguistically 'open' learning spaces in which students are encouraged to use all of their languages to engage with curricular content, for instance, by summarizing a reading with a partner in their native language (see Herrmann, 2016 for more suggestions). Many of these

strategies, however, are limited to oral modes of communication and restricted to out-of-school or after-school spaces. Relatively little is known about how teachers might encourage students to grow and develop their native language literacy skills in highly multilingual contexts and within a wider community with varied experiences with formal education.

Research-Informed Curriculum

In light of these broad challenges, our objective was to teach using English and students' native languages, across modalities, and examine these practices. To do so, we designed a curriculum unit that utilized social media, specifically Facebook. We created a whole-class Facebook group, using the "secret group" function to control membership and to prevent posts in the secret group from appearing on students' personal pages. Then, we introduced smaller monolingual secret groups in which transnational youth could use social media to engage with academic learning while at the same time creating a socially supported, visually rich context for native language literacy use.

Digital Literacy and Refugee Youth

We chose Facebook because almost all of the students had their own Facebook page, or had previously used one, so were familiar with the tool. This should come as little surprise because for many refugees, connectivity is vital: "smartphones and mobile access are now essential tools for the hundreds of thousands of refugees" (Byrne & Solomon, 2015), particularly during times of mobility and resettlement. Using social media in formal schooling makes it possible for youth to build on existing strengths afforded by mediated interaction (Leurs, 2014), and gives a context to use visual and print-based literacies, given that native language oral use is possible face-to-face in class.

Critical Media Analysis, Culture as Content, and Remix

This work was rooted in our belief that it is possible and productive to engage refugee youth new to schooling in meaningful, youth-focused digital media literacy learning in order to develop skills in the many dimensions of academic literacy. The standards-based curriculum that we developed was designed to engage youth in multilingual language interaction and inspire them to produce and discuss texts critically in order to explore and possibly upset status quo representations of their cultures. The essential questions that framed the curricular unit included:

1. What are the ways in which we understand native language culture through representations on the web?
2. How do we use social media to express, create, and understand ourselves?
3. How does using my native language make it easier to write about my cultural identity?
4. How does writing in my native language first help me write in English?
5. How does participation in content creation on the web impact second language (L2) learning?

Our academic objective was for students to produce written and oral analyses throughout the unit. We wanted students to engage in critical analyses of texts (including visual images) and contribute to the body of artifacts online that could represent their perspectives about their culture. We designed instruction to encourage the youth to use all their digital and linguistic resources throughout the process and in final products. The culminating project, done alone or in groups, was an individual or co-created digital text and an oral presentation that represented some aspect of the students' culture. The project emphasized strong literacy instruction as a social and intellectual phenomenon grounded in cultural and linguistic assets (Cummins & Early, 2011; Celic & Seltzer, 2012;).

As in the work of Cummins and Early (2011), we led our multilingual students in instructional activities that expanded the notion of literacy beyond print-based reading and writing, and affirmed and built on any of the language and literacy skills that the students brought to the academic tasks, including native language and

cultural knowledge. Hence, the products that resulted from the work are constitutive of their identity, not just displays of language of schooling and second language proficiency. Cummins and Early (2011) call the products of such work 'identity text' and argue that creating identity texts allows students to craft a 'counter-discourse' to "the implicit devaluation of students' abilities, languages, cultures, and identities that occurs in classrooms where students' preferred way of meaning making and home languages are ignored or treated with 'benign neglect'" (p. 4).

Contributions of such work posted online are a key element of digital inclusion in a time when authorship is broadly distributed, and the tools of media production are available in many settings. A key construct here is 'remix,' which requires an author to appropriate elements of published media and recombine them in a new creative blend (Lessig, 2005). Supporting youth as they create their own remixed representations of their culture provided them the opportunity to gain skills curating, evaluating, and contributing to collective knowledge. Together, remix and native language use give youth an opportunity to talk back to and participate in the construction of knowledge online.

Research Questions

Informed by the work reviewed above, we created our curriculum with a commitment to a sort of literacy instruction that affirmed students' identities, was grounded in the classroom, and excited students using social media typically reserved for out-of-school use. Our research questions were the following:

1. How do students respond to efforts to promote peer-to-peer native language communication?
2. How does native language use promote opportunities to learn academic content, skills, and language?

Methodology

To address these questions, we focused in particular on students' language use while participating in the classroom activities (see Bigelow, Vanek, King & Abdi [in press] for expanded discussion of project). Project data included a downloaded copy of the class Facebook pages (22 pages, produced over 11 days) and video recordings of students' presentations (approximately 3 hours of recordings). We analyzed how the students used multiple languages, images, and interaction in the Facebook groups in an effort to understand how they expressed meaning, created community, and represented themselves. We strove for a high degree of analytical quality and rigor through a number of means. For instance, we built *credibility* through the deep expertise of our research team. Our analyses created *dependability* and *confirmability* through collaboration among authors, including a multilingual Somali-speaking author (Abdi), and peer debriefing between the authors who were also instructors (Bigelow and Vanek).

Context

Minnesota is home to a large East African population. U.S. Census data estimated that there were 44,000 East Africans living in Minnesota in 2012, home to the largest Somali-born population (21,000) in the United States, although this number is widely believed to be inaccurately low. The majority of the foreign-born individuals from Somalia in the US are refugees or asylees (82% in 2010), and 40% of the Somali-born residents have less than a high school education (Gambino, Trevelyan, & Fitzwater, 2014). In Minnesota public schools, in academic year 2014-2015, district data indicate that there were 19,126 Somali-speaking children and 1,517 Oromo-speaking children.

This project was carried out in a secondary school (grades 9- 12) with an all-immigrant and majority East African student body. "Kennedy" enrolls about 150 students every year and employs 10 teachers. The ESL teacher allowed us to guest teach the unit during a summer school English as a second language (ESL) class. We delivered the instruction over five days, which spanned a period of three weeks during summer school. We borrowed a class set of iPads from our University for in-class use after installing Facebook and PicCollage on

each device. The authors, the regular ESL teacher, and an Oromo and Somali-speaking Kennedy staff member from the school were in all of the Facebook groups.

Participants

The summer class was made up of 19 students, 14 from East Africa (Somalia, Kenya, Djibuti, Ethiopia) and five from Ecuador. In this analysis, we focus on the 14 participants in the Somali secret Facebook group, which included all of the Somali speaking students as well as the two students who identified as Oromo and also spoke Somali. All of these students experienced limited or interrupted access to native language literacy and formal schooling and they all had refugee experiences, including displacement, residence in refugee camps, and separation from family members (Abdi, 2007). The guest instructors (Bigelow and Vanek) positioned themselves as teachers. They used English in their instruction but facilitated native language use among students throughout the unit.

Findings

We found that students participated with high levels of engagement and enthusiasm throughout the project. This was particularly true of the Somali students. As the class was acclimating to using Facebook together, the participants introduced themselves, linked their Facebook name to their real name or how they are known in the actual classroom ("This is xxxx how is everyone"), or posted a basic, friendly welcomes ("Heeeeeeeyy you guys") to classmates they already know.

Posts in the Somali-language Facebook group

Participation in the Somali-language Facebook group was highly multilingual. Table 1 illustrates how many students (all pseudonyms, except the instructors) authored posts and which languages were used. Most of the activity on this Facebook page occurred over seven days, and overlapped with three of the five days of face-to-face instruction. What is apparent in this overview is the fact that the participants used many of their languages, not just Somali, in the Somali-only Facebook group.

Table 1. Overview of number of posts and languages used by participants

Facebook Pseudonym/Gender	Total Posts	Languages Used
Safia Abdi (F)	2	1 English; 1 French & Somali
مرحباً بكم (M)	2	1 Somali; 1 English & Somali
Mohamed Ahmed (M)	6	4 English; 1 English & Somali; 1 English & Spanish
Jaceyl Mooge (M)	5	1 English; 4 English & Somali
Sahara Haji (F)	3	1 Somali; 2 English & Somali
Maryam Hasan (F)	2	2 Somali
Ayan Ali (F)	4	2 English; 1 Somali; 1 English & Somali
Xasiloon LX Ahmed (F)	2	1 English; 1 English & Somali
Moos Ballon Dorka (M)	1	1 English & Somali
Quruxley Farhiya (F)	2	2 English

Maymun Jama (F)	2	2 English
Jen Vanek (F)	3	3 English
Martha Bigelow (F)	3	2 English & Somali; 1 Somali

Peer-to-Peer Multilingual Language Use

From the outset, participants used their multiple languages in multiple ways in the Somali-only Facebook group. For example, in the following excerpt, the participant began with a greeting in Somali (*Wallalaha*), switched to English (*Kennedy international high school welcome to high like me if like. or help us comments OK please*) and then switched back to Somali (*fadlan kqsooqayb gala schoolkan ooy waxbarashadiisu aad iyo aad usarayso*), which roughly translates to "please, participate this school, which has high academic standards." (July 11, 2015, Sahara Haji)

This mix of Somali and English encouraged peers to "like" the post and participate in the school. The post affirms the quality of the high school, thus legitimizing both activities. The use of multiple languages can also be seen in the following excerpts (Figures 1-3) as the students introduced themselves and welcomed each other to the group.

An example of such a post in the Somali Facebook group can be seen in Figure 1, below.

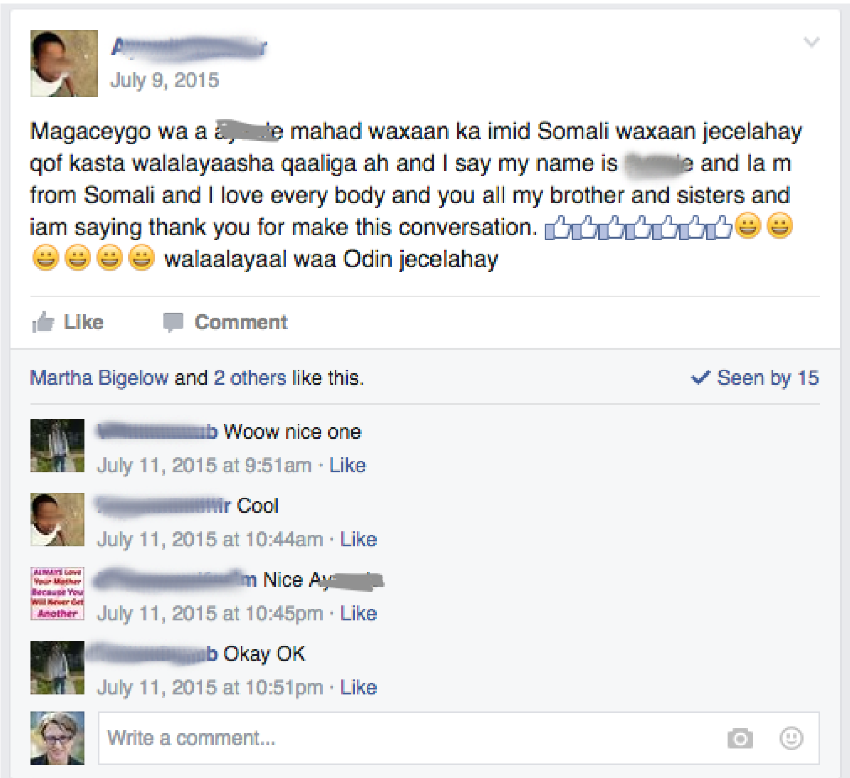

Figure 1. Self-translated introduction, July 9, 2015

This post demonstrates the inclusive practice some of the youth employed of self-translating from Somali into English. Table 2, below, shows how much overlap there is between the Somali and the English text.

Table 2. Translation of excerpt 2

Somali (and English) original	*English translation*

Magaceygo wa a مرحباً بكم mahad waxaan ka imid Somali waxaan jecelahay qof kasta welalayaasha qaaliga ah	My name is مرحباً بكم and I am from Somali love to all of my revered brothers (gender inclusive)
and I say my name is مرحباً بكم and la m from Somali and I love everybody and you all my brother aand sisters and iamsaying thank you for make this conversation	
walaalayaal waa Odin jecelahay	I love you all, dear brothers (gender inclusive)

Like the previous post, this one is positive and inviting in English and Somali. Peers affirm the post by reading it: "Seen by 15", with three "likes" and four comments.

After the introductory posts, the Somali Facebook group served as an open space for peers to share emerging content for their culture projects, and practice creating media representing their culture and writing about their ideas. In Figure 2, we see that a female student writes about the cultural practice of henna tattoos, particularly for special events (e.g., weddings) and holidays (e.g., Eid). This participant initiated other posts about food and Hijab fashion in English, and also responded to Somali or translingual posts in English.

Figure 2. Somali henna, July 11, 2015

As the workshop unfolded, the complexity of the topics increased, moving from introductions to affirmations to posts such as this photograph of a bus in Somalia (Figure 3). This image begins to approach topics related to culture that are more complicated than food and fashion. Facebook reports that nine people saw the photo, but nobody commented on it. One reason may be that that this content is more difficult to discuss.

Figure 3. Everyday culture, July 14, 2015

The students' multilingual Facebook posts have many possible explanations. First, many multilingual youth are accustomed to communicating with other multilingual youth, who leverage all of their linguistic skills for a wide range of communicative purposes, including humor and evoking religion. This is evident, in the multiple ways youth used language in the Somali secret group. For instance, the names they chose often carried deeper meaning in Somali. One male student's name signals "flying," which speaks to experiences of travel. In addition, the youth used a variety of pictures to accompany their text. The students were extremely aware of their audience and making their posts comprehensible to all, while fronting particular linguistic and cultural identities. Furthermore, their language and visual choices are informed not as much by the goals set out by the instructors, but often by interactions that occurred among students.

Process Writing and Content Engagement

The second part of our analysis focuses on how the students used their languages as well as technologies to engage in critical media analysis and to create their final projects. We found that students used the iPads to find images for their collages, look up multiple and multimodal versions of Somali folktales, and to compose and share text, often collaboratively and always using their native languages orally as they worked together. For

example, one student opted to use a hard copy of a bilingually written Somali folktale to compose her own version of the text while another found a narrated version on YouTube. During the composing process, students worked side-by-side on their own projects while consulting each other frequently or composing text together. Throughout the writing process, we encouraged students to use all their languages to create their projects to be posted on the Facebook page, as well as presented orally.

In addition to scaffolding the production of the text through a multilingual writing process, we also scaffolded the content of the projects, which focused on the topic of how cultures are represented in the media and online. Our first discussion about culture was done in English; we led the youth through an activity where they used a graphic organizer to take notes about different aspects of their native culture(s) including concrete things such as food and dress. We tried to model critique of popular images of culture by sharing negative images in the media of our own cultures to the students (e.g., everyone eats fast food), and counter-discourse to the way the media portrays our own lives and communities. This did not seem to inform any of the early representations of culture posted by the students in the Facebook group until a student posted a picture of a dwelling in a refugee camp (Figure 4). This post emerged among a number of posts of Somali and Ethiopian houses, including a screenshot with a Google search term "Somalia homes", showing how one student was finding images.

Figure 4: This is not a Somali house, July 13, 2015

This image, with the student produced text "Mansh allaha guriyhii Somalia Africa" (*English: God bless the Somali houses in Africa*), triggered an intense and lively discussion among Somali speakers:

Students: [much overlapping discussion among students in Somali]

Instructor: Maryam? Where's Maryam? [The instructor was trying to find the author of the post using her Facebook name.]

Student: That is not culture.

Instructor: Come on up. You don't wanna talk about this one?

Student: Fadeexa waaye (*English: It's embarrassing/outing*)

[loud, excited, inaudible cross talk]

Martha: Yeah, ok, so where is this? Where is this picture? [inaudible cross-talk]

Student: Naa naga tag (*English: Get lost*) [this comment is made to another female]

Martha: Ok, ok, let's go one person at a time. Sadio do you have a comment?

Student: It is written here that is Somalia

Student: Somali people are not like that

This moment in the instruction was a critical rupture in how the students understood their task to create cultural representations of their own. Maryam clearly understood the task and posted an image of how her culture is portrayed in the media, as homeless, as refugees, as desperate. She wished to trouble this, and offer a counter-discourse to this very simplistic and inaccurate depiction of Somali culture. The loud claim from a peer, "That is not culture," worked to solidify a new way of thinking about culture. After this critical incident, the whole class began to produce more sophisticated collages and writing about their collages.

From Process to Product

The collaborative work students did appear multilingually in the Somali group, in the whole-class secret group, and even on one student's Facebook wall. Students produced collages on topics of their choice and wrote text to accompany their images. Then, each group did an oral presentation in English while projecting their Facebook post onto a screen in front of the room.

Three students (2 ethnically Somali and 1 ethnically Oromo) produced a Facebook post collaboratively, but with one student typing the text in English. Figure 7 shows the youth presenting together.

Figure 5. Somali/Oromo presentation

The written text of the Facebook post says:

These picture is show as somali and oromo culture together all around the world has different cultures but somali and oromo culture is close is the same

The images on the post include depictions of shared aspects of the two cultures: traditional clothing, agricultural practices, holiday celebrations, community gatherings and religious practices.

Segments of the transcription of the 4 minute, 37 second oral presentation, the class discussion that followed, and the students' Facebook posts made in response to the collage show how the projects supported multiple types of academic literacy, and the result of extensive work in the students' native languages, in ways that seemed to enhance the presentations in English. To illustrate, one of the students, Mohamed, begins the group presentation quite formally, as represented in the following excerpts:

First of all we're starting here today to presentation our culture. Oromo culture. Somali culture together. and we're working to show us exactly what Somali culture is and we're trying to know what everybody culture is. our classmates…

In this excerpt, the student is setting the stage for the presentation and establishing that there are many commonalities between Oromo and Somali cultures with the pictures. Then Amin takes over, and refers to the text on the screen and says: "*This is say here, the culture of Somali and Oromo we are close speaking language and writing also speaking*." While Mohamed is able to speak extemporaneously and present using a formal register, Amin reads text from the screen as he points to individual words. Amin then turns the floor over to Ahmed, the Oromo speaker, with a formal gesture. Ahmed begins by addressing the class and reinforces the previously argued thesis restating many similarities found between Oromo and Somali culture, religion, and language.

After the presentation, Ahmed was asked about the picture of the tree. He said: "*Just I said I explained. When people celebrate culture holiday they go, a long time ago, they go near the tree and they celebrate together. And they talk together and they eat some food in here."* We notice that Amin says less than his peers during the presentation except for when someone from the audience asks him about a photograph. He says, "*I don't know what to call it* [hesitates/looks to partners] *from the skin of the animals we put like this one in the house* [points to the same picture that Mohamed referred to, showing the wedding and house]. Because Amin seems to flounder, an exchange occurs, allowing for all to learn the word "beehive", "the home of honey ah ah the home of bee". At this point, the class is chatting multilingually about the photograph after which the class asks a few more questions and applauds the group.

We believe that the culturally relevant, multilingual and translingual processes which came before the presentation contributed to a highly engaging, comprehensible presentation. The students' emphasis on the similarity between Somali and Oromo culture is in direct opposition to the post about the refugee home. Conversely, in their presentation they discuss the significance of rituals, household items, and climate condition in producing the culture of everyday living. By building on and speaking back to the knowledge that is produced by their peers, the youth demonstrated academic ways of engaging with content. They were active participants in negotiating issues of representation and voice with regard to cultural production. As illustrated here, the use of native languages in the Facebook project created the needed spaces for these youth to bring all of their languages together while at the same time engaging the work of literacy development through intellectually and culturally relevant ways.

Conclusion and Implications

This study examined student response to efforts to promote peer-to-peer native language communication, and concomitantly, how these efforts are linked with opportunities for student learning of curriculum and academic content. With respect to the first objective, we found that despite our efforts to create a monolingual, native language workspace for students, their participation was characterized by multilingual, highly inclusive posts. With respect to the second objective of the study, our data suggests that use of the native language provided multimodal opportunities for engagement with course curriculum and activities. Students, for instance, were able to move on to more complex and nuanced discussions of culture in the second part of the course, in part through their translingual and native language work.

Pervasive Monoglossic Perspective

Reflecting on these findings in the local context of our work, we suggest that new legislation promoting students' native languages in Minnesota schools is certainly a welcome advance, and one that is in line with substantial empirical work indicating the benefits of such an approach. However, one important finding of this project is that these policies are out of step with the ways that transnational youth use language translingually. As Menken (2013) observes, even the more innovative bilingual approaches, policies and their attendant

rationales operate "from a monoglossic perspective" which "addresses each of a bilingual's languages separately, without acknowledging the possibility that the minds of bilinguals work differently in ways that involve dynamic languaging, and that therefore demand new pedagogies and classroom practices" (Menken, 2013, p. 465). This monolingual perspective is evident, for instance, in the Minnesota legislation's delineation of English language development and native language development as separate objectives, with instructional planning and assessment measures viewed as independent. This monoglossic bias was also at work in our own assumptions that framed this project, such as our attempts to establish monolingual (Somali, Oromo, or Spanish) writing groups.

Translanguaging

More recent work, led by Ofelia García and her colleagues, in contrast, has emphasized the translingual nature of language competence and use. For García and Wei (2014), translanguaging is the dynamic process whereby multilingual language users mediate complex social and cognitive activities through strategic employment of multiple semiotic resources to act, to know and to be. Translanguaging is the understanding of the linguistic proficiencies of multilinguals as a unified system, not separate monolingual entities (García & Wei, 2014). Translanguaging is a particularly useful construct for understanding the language use of migrants in a transnational and highly technological world because, although it can incorporate code-switching as a description of linguistic repertoire, it moves beyond it to fluidly include all discursive practices.

Applying translanguaging in the classroom means adopting a translanguaging framework that "ensures that students' different native language practices are not only validated, but also used and leveraged for academic purposes - to think critically and creatively, to produce authentic work, to analyze language use, to better understand what are traditionally known as students' own bidialectal and bilingual practices" (García & Hesson, 2015, p. 221). This reconceptualization of multilingual language use challenges monolingual and even bilingual assumptions that permeate current language education policy and instead, treats translingual discourse as the norm. Our data show that we need to move toward practices which "support the linguistic and cultural dexterity and plurality" (Paris, 2012, p. 95) that youth already possess and use, and that these assets can even be leveraged for the development of native language literacies.

Impact of Social Media and Remix

Encouraging youth to employ remixing and translanguaging together in support of their learning, especially when using social media as an instructional tool, is synergistic. Social media, by definition, is participatory, and requires viewing literacy as a social practice and an opportunity to express a "critical reading of reality" (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 36). Affording learners the opportunities to draw on all literacy and linguistic resources in support of their participation can help them develop awareness of their ability to "contribute to collective intelligence" … and recognize how an individual "shapes the web environment through our digital networks, whether they exist on social networking, social sharing or microblogging sites" (Pegrum, 2011, p. 9). Through this project, we saw the potential for pedagogies involving social media to foster the sort of engagement that permits refugee and immigrant youth to use their linguistic and cultural resources to create content not only for their peers locally, in class, but for global audiences.

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