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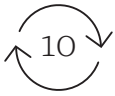


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Not Just a Hashtag

Using Black Twitter to Engage in Critical Visual Pedagogy

Mia L. Knowles-Davis and Robert L. Moore

We live in a global society in which we are constantly exposed to new technologies, people, and situations that transform our perceptions and worldviews. As we are exposed to these new experiences, it is increasingly necessary to maintain a critical eye and question what we are seeing. It is not enough for higher education merely to teach material; instructors should also teach the responsibilities and ethics that coincide with it. Encouraging criticality in higher education helps learners to develop a deeper understanding of social justice, inequality, and oppressive systems, and it teaches learners how to combat those issues in their own lives (Chatelier, 2015; Muhammad, 2018). To do so, higher education should seek to adopt a transformative educational lens through which learning is grounded in learners' lived experiences. This can be achieved through the integration of critical pedagogy, which seeks to develop awareness of power structures and one's own position within them, creating the opportunity to implement constructive forms of action (Freire, 2006). Anderson and Keehn (2019) argue that the foundational value of critical pedagogy is the identification and confrontation of power structures that do not support all people. And as Bradshaw (2017) postulates, critical pedagogy necessitates a steadfast and constant review of our daily experiences to ensure that they are responsive to diverse learner needs and experiences.

By aligning educational practices with students' life experiences, teachers can teach more meaningful material.

Digital technologies play an important role in our negotiation of critical pedagogies. Because of our reliance on technology in our daily lives, educators must look for ways to leverage technology in their instructional approaches (Moore & Fodrey, 2018). The pandemic of COVID-19 has demonstrated just how important online learning can be, with instruction pivoting from in-person to virtual settings seemingly overnight in the United States. However, it is critical that the integration of technology into higher education is culturally sensitive and relevant. Inclusive educational technology curriculums are necessary to remove alienating and dehumanizing structures from educational spaces (Bradshaw, 2017). As instructors seek better ways to integrate real-world experiences into their course instruction and delivery (Cho et al., 2015; Lowell & Moore, 2020), they need to ensure that those integrated experiences reflect the lived experiences of students, particularly those from marginalized communities. The challenge can be in identifying and understanding these experiences, particularly when they are outside the lived experience of the instructor. Technology, specifically social media, can provide opportunities to bring those perspectives into the classroom through critical pedagogical practices.

Critical pedagogy involves educating learners to develop a critical consciousness. The critical element requires an ongoing and deep analysis of social stereotypes, hierarchies, and structures in the world, especially those that affect marginalized communities (Bradshaw, 2017). By definition, a marginalized community will not have its perspective or voice integrated into mainstream discussions. Social media platforms such as Twitter present opportunities to give voice to these marginalized communities. In this context, we see Twitter, Black Twitter in particular, as an educational technology tool that can be used to bring marginalized voices and perspectives into the classroom and stimulate critical dialogue. We focus on visual representations in this discussion and use critical visual pedagogy to interrogate power inequalities inherent in media (Shankar, 2014). Next we describe critical visual pedagogy and use Black Twitter

as our context for discussing ways to create “counter hegemonic visual presentation[s]” (Shankar, 2014, p. 347).

Critical Visual Pedagogy

Critical visual pedagogy (Shankar, 2014) highlights and investigates the power inequalities reinforced within visual media to pursue counter-hegemonic interpretations and representations (for more on this issue, see Chapter 8 of this volume). This is a method of engaging in visual politics; it has also been utilized to promote the reinvention of radical visual anthropology (Elwood & Hawkins, 2017; Shankar, 2019). Imagery plays a crucial role in creating and reinforcing grand narratives of poverty, suffering, and social status, but critical visual pedagogy promotes the creation of *equitable imagery* (Shankar, 2014; Smiley & Fakunle, 2016). In the context of our discussion, by “grand narrative” we refer to narratives grounded in a Europe-centric interpretation of history used to legitimize oppressive social norms and existing power relations (Linde & Arthur, 2015). The negative stereotypes surrounding natural black hair are an example of a colonial narrative established in the American slave era that has persisted into modern times. This narrative associates natural, protective hairstyles such as braids or dreadlocks with a lack of professionalism and cleanliness (Tharps & Byrd, 2014). Images used in the media perpetuate such oppressive grand narratives. For example, images of India used in anti-poverty agency work and popular US cinematography often depict individuals in a state of struggle and despair but fail to show the diverse lived experiences of the people (Shankar, 2014). To dismantle the power dynamics that use imagery to legitimize oppressive power relations, Shankar (2014) applies some of the key principles of critical pedagogy (e.g., questioning and challenging power structures, using self-reflection, learning through dialogue, and engaging in critical thinking) to interrogate visual media. The objective is to create ethical educational spaces engaged critically and explicitly in the broader social, cultural, political, and economic contexts of education.

Black Twitter as a Site for Critical Visual Pedagogy

An effective way to create ethical educational spaces is by leveraging social media to bring diverse perspectives into the classroom, particularly in less diverse classrooms. Although it was not designed as an educational technology tool, Twitter—a microblogging and social networking tool—provides rich opportunities for critical discourse. When utilizing social media spaces such as Twitter, it is important to consider social media literacy, the understanding of the tasks needed for and the implications of performing those tasks in social media (Livingstone, 2014). Marginalized communities increasingly use Twitter to amplify their calls for social justice and reform (Blevins et al., 2019). Twitter literacy, also known as “Twitteracy,” refers to the metaknowledge that users need to interact on the platform, such as sharing tweets or threads and live streaming (Manca et al., 2021). The openness of the platform allows users to take control of the messages and images that they are sharing and gives them the opportunity to broadcast their views to the world. Through the networked connectivity on the Twitter platform, there are opportunities to see how these voices and messages can be shared outside these marginalized communities. Yet millions of tweets are posted on Twitter daily, and navigating through this content can be overwhelming (Moore, 2014).

Filtering tweets using hashtags allows for a focus on specific topics ranging from television shows to subcommunities (Anderson & Keehn, 2019; Moore, 2014). When these hashtags coalesce around a specific theme, they can create a subcommunity within Twitter that can be referred to as a digital counter-public (Hill, 2018): any virtual, online, or otherwise digitally networked community in which members actively resist hegemonic power (on digital hegemony, see Chapters 8 and 9 of this volume), contest majoritarian narratives, engage in critical dialogues, or negotiate oppositional identities created by a dominant culture that alienates individuals to the point that they feel the need to define themselves as juxtaposed to the mainstream instead of defining themselves by who they are (Ogbu & Davis, 2003). One such digital counter-public is Black Twitter—a subcommunity within Twitter specifically interested in issues affecting the black community.

Hill (2018) describes Black Twitter as an online space for rejecting “rigid respectability politics” and organizing resistance to anti-black state violence. Respectability politics is when members of a marginalized group acquiesce to mainstream views to protect themselves from condemnation. But not all discussions within Black Twitter are politically driven. Engagement on Black Twitter can include community discussions of the latest black-themed sitcom or movie—for example works by Tyler Perry—or be a place to highlight, amplify, and bring attention to specific issues affecting the black community. The nature of Twitter allows for a rich discussion with multiple perspectives, and because of the public nature the issues that receive attention within Black Twitter often end up in mainstream media (Knight Foundation, n.d.).

The conversations in Black Twitter regarding social injustices, economic disparities, and other issues affecting the black community globally are invaluable. Within this network, users are empowered to engage in their communities actively and positively and have the agency to partake in these discussions as much or as little as they desire. One example is the Black Lives Matter hashtag (#BlackLivesMatter). It serves several purposes, not only bringing attention to injustices faced by those in the black community but also celebrating the accomplishments of black people and showing solidarity across the Twitter platform. The hashtag was prominently displayed at protests worldwide for the unjust killing of George Floyd Jr., an African American man, on May 25, 2020, by a white police officer who knelt on his neck for 8 minutes and 46 seconds. Indeed, a search for this hashtag will show its broad reach—from a protest in a small US city to a protest in another part of the world. By tagging tweets with this hashtag, anyone can contribute to the conversation. But more importantly, from an educator’s perspective, the hashtag is an opportunity to provide real-time insights into the struggles of the black community in the United States and beyond and to bring those experiences into formal learning. Black Twitter is a prime example of how social media literacy can provide opportunities to participate in collaborative spaces that can develop critical thinking skills (Manca et al., 2021).

Tough discussions in the classroom regarding racism and media bias, among other difficult topics, can be facilitated by utilizing discussions

on Black Twitter. Anthropology, visual politics, intercultural education, and social justice are a few of the critical pedagogical subjects covered in Black Twitter threads. This is where Black Twitter fills a gap in formal higher education; it identifies areas of concern in a real-time situation and becomes a source for organic instances of critical visual pedagogy. Unfortunately, too often the stories told on Black Twitter remain there and within the black community; we encourage instructors to bring these conversations into classrooms (in-person and online).

Shankar's critical visual pedagogy is a useful approach to make sense of the many narratives on Twitter in ethical ways and to develop aspects of critical pedagogy focusing on the "art-media-technology nexus" (2014, p. 347). The images and narratives shared in Black Twitter tweets are the art, and Twitter itself is both the medium and the technology. Black Twitter, effectively, is a space in which critical visual pedagogy occurs *organically* and provides a platform for practising critical visual pedagogy in a structured way.

The rich conversations on Black Twitter demonstrate that the notion that white scholars are the sole curators of knowledge and the stereotype that young black people are not engaged with the world around them is a serious misconception (Brown & Crutchfield, 2017). Higher education can leverage this wealth of information to identify situations that need attention and design educational experiences for students in a way that can dispel the oppressive grand narrative. Below we provide a few examples that demonstrate why this is important in the US context. This is important for us as black American scholars because grand narratives affect how we, as people, traverse our daily lives. Being a black American means having to be aware constantly of how we perceive our actions, how other members of the community perceive our actions, and how law enforcement perceives our actions. All of these perceptions are affected, influenced, and validated in some way by the images in mainstream media.

Examples from Black Twitter

As we noted, Black Twitter holds a wealth of information, and we think that it is helpful to provide two specific examples along with some broad

recommendations for how educators might integrate them into their instruction. Our examples highlight social injustices: how the depiction of crime varies between ethnicities, with black perpetrators typically portrayed in a more negative light than others, advancing an unjust grand narrative of black people as prone to violence and criminality.

Black Twitter often discusses different visual portrayals of criminals along racial lines. Since Black Twitter is an open platform, examples and discussions might not be empirically backed and often integrate the lived experiences of those participating in this discussion. The image attached to Derenic Byrd's (2021) tweet (see <https://twitter.com/DerenicByrd/status/1352559036915310594>) shows an example of critical visual pedagogy in action. The tweet highlights the varying standards by which black bodies and white bodies are held accountable for their misdeeds. White teenager Riley Williams stole a laptop from Speaker Pelosi's office during the insurrection in Washington, DC, on January 6, 2021, but was released to her mother without incident. In contrast, Kalief Browder allegedly stole a backpack and spent three years at Riker's Island without trial, which resulted in Browder committing suicide. Black teenagers such as Browder are not afforded lenience even when there is no evidence of a crime.

Mainstream media often use labels that vilify black men to shift the blame from the abuse by law enforcement to justify the outcome (Lee, 2017; Smiley & Fakunle, 2016). Black Twitter exposes the double standard in the American justice system that provides an opportunity for redemption, even if it is just in the eyes of the public, for white bodies but not for black bodies. How would you create an activity that helps students to develop critical consciousness of injustices in the American justice system? A visual presentation activity, for example, could challenge students to select a news headline featuring an image that reinforces a grand narrative and then interrogate media through conversations, dialogues, and students working as producers of media. A writing activity could task each student with researching Kalief Browder and Riley Williams and then creating a reflective artifact from the findings. Such artifacts could be created in any medium and shared with others asynchronously or synchronously. In their creation, students would learn about media literacy,

design thinking, and critical thinking. It is also important that educators are cognizant of the disadvantages of networked platforms such as Twitter (e.g., echo chambers) and use them as opportunities to discuss important skills such as source checking, digital literacy, and ethics.

As another example, Black Twitter has also noted the frequency with which images of dressed-up white offenders are depicted by the media to show redeemable individuals worthy of a second chance. In a tweet by UrbanTakeOne in 2019 (see https://twitter.com/UrbanTake_001/status/1182661482942738433), we see the Walmart El Paso shooter, Patrick Crusius. He is dressed in a suit despite being on trial for the murder of 23 people and the injury of 23 others. In contrast, a black man in a prison uniform, on trial for robbery, is shown with his mouth taped shut by an Ohio judge. Not only is the black man in the prison uniform another example of the representation of a black body being associated with criminality, but also the humiliating implementation of a gag order infringes his dignity. Twitter users argued that there were more humane options such as removing the defendant from the courtroom or fining him instead of gagging him like one might muzzle an animal.

Diminishing black bodies dates back to slave times in which they were treated as products with no say in their own existence (Lee, 2017). Using mugshots of black offenders perpetuates a grand narrative that associates blackness with criminality (Smiley & Fakunle, 2016). Media that feed that narrative to the public deny defendants the innocent-until-proven-guilty standard that the American justice system is intended to uphold. It makes them guilty in the eyes of the public before they have been granted a trial, serving to perpetuate the narrative that black people are inherently criminals. In contrast, displaying white college students in suits and ties contradicts the fact that they are criminals because they are not depicted as such. Since they are presented in a socially acceptable way, they are more likely to receive the benefit of the doubt from the public.

Educators could create a scavenger hunt activity and task students to find other specific examples of images in which a black offender is presented in a more negative light than a white offender. Students could then use online tools of collaboration (e.g., Voicethread or Flipgrid) to share what they have found with their classmates (Lowenthal & Moore,

2020; Oliver et al., 2017). Additional resources for social justice-themed activities can be found using online resources available in the Flipgrid help centre. As the students find examples, they should reflect on their findings. Are they noticing specific sources that tend to portray black offenders more negatively? Are they noticing specific offences that receive more negative portrayals than others? What about communities or socio-economic status, are there any relationships there? In which ways can they see the traces of such grand narratives in content? These critical questions can be extended to other spaces and educational materials. Asking students to examine critically what they see through these types of questions can lead to a deeper understanding of how visual images can be subconsciously advancing grand narratives and how higher education is not immune to such injustices. For example, in a media resource,

- If there are people in a particular image, what are their relationships to each other? Is a hierarchy or social status depicted? How do you come to that conclusion?
- What is the background or setting of the image? Does the setting influence your understanding of the image or the situation?
- What do the textual elements say about the image? How do they align with your interpretation of the image? How do they differ? What does that tell you about the intention of the author/producer?
- How much do you know about the production process? Who designed this image, for whom, and how?
- How would you do things differently? Why?

Asking such questions allows students to critique the content/media creation process and gives them time for critical self-reflection. Would they, consciously or unconsciously, have made the same choices if in the same position? Students need to evaluate critically the impacts of what they design and how their biases and social positions affect their designs. Failure to do so will result in a society that continues to be insensitive to the negative impacts that misrepresentations in imagery and media create for marginalized communities.

Implications

Higher education for some is their first experience interacting with other cultures. Institutions should be responsible, therefore, for ensuring that students obtain critical consciousness of social justice. We recognize that this might be a new experience for faculty members, and we have attempted not only to identify issues but also to provide suggestions for techniques and activities that can be used to integrate these concepts into instruction. Even instructors who are not familiar with critical pedagogy or do not have applicable lived experiences have opportunities to engage their classes in critical discourse. In fact, we encourage those instructors to extend themselves and integrate these conversations about social justice into their instruction. As we have argued here, critical visual pedagogy (Shankar, 2014) can be used as a model to develop instructional activities that foster critical discourse.

In this chapter, we have shown how Black Twitter, and #BlackLivesMatter in particular, serve as a transition from more passive telling of black experiences to showing vividly the grim realities of the black experience in mainstream media. Critical pedagogy encourages individuals to self-reflect and be more sensitive to the realities of others, directly aligning with how #BlackLivesMatter tries to show those outside the black community exactly what it is like within it. Black Twitter makes the movement accessible to others and keeps those following it up to date on every development. Students can learn about the complexities within the black community regarding systemic racism, social justice, and media representation. Individuals outside the black community might not be attuned to the issues or their severity disproportionately affecting that community. The exposure that Black Twitter offers through critical visual pedagogy can broaden students' perspectives not only to increase their awareness of these issues but also to provide them with tactics to identify and address these issues in their own communities. Black Twitter can be used both as a resource to identify incidents and as a source of curation through which instructors and students can engage in critical discussions with individuals in communities different from their own.

As we have highlighted, there are ample opportunities for educators to identify culturally relevant topics and create authentic assignments that foster a deeper level of critical discourse. We also would like to note that we want to see scholars of colour being discussed, integrated, and utilized within curriculums and not simply used as another reading assignment. Although we appreciate hashtags such as #CiteASister that seek to amplify the scholarship of minority scholars of colour, we challenge educators to do more than simply cite these scholars. The negation of grand narratives will require more critical discussion across curriculums and disciplines. The issues affecting social injustice are global and have far-reaching implications.

Conclusion

Globalization has led to more opportunities to experience and interact with other cultures. But along with this shift is the potential to advance grand narratives that warp our perspectives on marginalized groups and countries. We are not always aware when this is happening since it has become so ingrained in our consumption of mainstream media. We have positioned Black Twitter as a digital counter-public that can help instructors to find “blind spots” in their perspectives and experiences. The rich discussions that take place on Black Twitter can present multiple opportunities for instructors looking to identify culturally relevant issues and learn how to integrate these lessons into their instruction. As Black Twitter engages in the critical discussion on the ills of the grand narrative, it also presents resources in terms of both people and scholarship that can be useful for instructors interested in bringing these conversations into their classrooms. Furthermore, Black Twitter plays an important role in integrating critical visual pedagogy into higher education because it provides a starting point for critical discourse. Black Twitter also fosters the voices of people with various lived experiences, whom Bradshaw (2017) recommends seeking input from to engage in more ethical and effective self-reflection and self-interrogation.

To incorporate critical pedagogy into higher education, institutions must establish spaces that foster self-awareness, self-interrogation, and

dialogue for individuals to learn from one another. Institutions of higher education that undergo the iterative process of critical digital pedagogy when designing, developing, and implementing learning spaces will foster students better equipped to transform harmful systems. More inclusive and diverse learning spaces that facilitate conversations addressing inequality and cultural bias will create a more just and equitable society. We further challenge higher education to demonstrate that ethical practices within the classroom are not only encouraged by instructors but also essential and directly tied to institutional values and success. We hope that this chapter contributes to the type of transformative change within higher education essential to eradicate grand narratives that further social injustices in society.

Key Takeaways

- It is not enough for higher education merely to teach material; instructors should also teach the responsibilities and ethics that coincide with it.
- Digital counter-publics, such as Black Twitter, can identify our “blind spots” and bring issues involving marginalized people to the mainstream.
- Instructors, even those who are not part of Black Twitter, can use stories in the network to develop critically sensitive instructional experiences for students.
- Institutions of higher education that undergo the iterative process of critical visual pedagogy will foster students better equipped to transform harmful systems.

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