

Semiosis and ethicality in youth transnational digital storytelling

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Abstract

This chapter explores an ethical dilemma encountered in the use of film as a vehicle for creative expression and transnational/transcultural communication in a global youth education and research project. Global StoryBridges connects young people from different sites who create and share digital stories. The research presented was conducted at the site in Catalonia, although it implicates young people and project facilitators at a site in Uganda. We conduct a transmodal analysis of a particular video production by the Catalan youth which was deemed to be too controversial to be shared with the Ugandan partners. We consider both the semiotic assemblage of the film and ethnographic data collected during the video production process and after the film had been removed from circulation. The research insight into how semiosis travels across people and places, and into the new meanings that come about in the transnational/transcultural flow of communicative resources. We also critically reflect on ethical arguments for sharing or removing the young people's creative production from circulation from the lens of critical cosmopolitanism, as a model of 21st century global citizenship.

Keywords: Transmodalities, critical cosmopolitanism, transnational/transcultural communication, ethnography, ethics

Introduction

This chapter considers an ethical dilemma encountered in the use of film as a vehicle for creative expression and transnational/transcultural communication in a global youth education and research project. The focus is on how phenomena – in this case gender and sexuality – are constructed as culturally (in)significant in an interactional scenario implicating face-to-face and digital interfaces. The communicative artefact at the centre of the analysis presented is a digital story produced by a group of young people in Catalonia for an audience of peers in Uganda with whom they had previously shared other digital stories. The video was meant to be shared across an internet platform and commented on by both groups of young people through asynchronous chat, as they had done with previous productions. The ongoing exchange was, however, interrupted by the project coordinator, who deemed this particular digital story to be too controversial to be shared across cultural borders, and thus removed it from the platform. We frame the (non)encounter between the youth as an intercultural one – in line with the focus of the volume – in the sense that the cultural ‘others’ (i.e., the Ugandan youth) were projected as audience to the digital story produced by the Catalan young people and are categorised as such by different parties to the critical incident as they reconstruct it in the

ethnographic data studied in this chapter. Furthermore, although we do not explicitly analyse the relevance of culture in her interpretations of the video, it might also be noted that the project coordinator was based in North America, unlike the other participants whose voices are heard in this chapter, who are based in Catalonia. Therefore, entanglements across cultural borders emerge as relevant to the semiotic processes studied.

Our understanding of ‘culture’ is influenced by the approach to ‘context’, more generally, followed in traditions including interactional sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, linguistic ethnography, ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, all of which guide our work. ‘Culture’ is understood to be situated and emergent, an accomplishment of communicative processes, not merely a factor influencing them. Culture, like context, is conceived as “a socially constituted, interactively sustained, time-bound phenomenon” (Goodwin & Duranti, 1992, p. 6), which is both oriented to and produced in participants’ practical activities (Schegloff, 1992; ten Have, 2002). From this perspective, participants not only orient to cultural concepts, identities, similarities, or differences in the course of their actions in building intersubjectivity; rather they take part in the situated production of those phenomena. This approach to ‘culture’ is coherent with Cameron’s (1990) call for a ‘demythologised sociolinguistics’, in the sense that we reject that something called ‘culture’ somehow exists before something called ‘communication’. Rather than mobilising pre-conceived notions of culture to help interpret people’s communicative actions (what Cameron refers to as the ‘correlational fallacy’), in this chapter the focus is on exploring how different parties to the critical incident studied locally construct understandings of phenomena as being culturally relevant.

Placing the educational project and research presented in this chapter within the language educational field from which we write, there is ample consensus about the need to promote plurilingual and intercultural competences in contexts of globalisation and digitalisation. However, different voices have called attention to the traces of neoliberalism in the ways these competences are positioned as desirable educational outcomes (e.g., Block, 2018; Gray, O’Regan, Wallace, 2018). In this chapter we align with critical claims that alternative models of citizenship are necessary, fostering critical consciousness of the ‘local’ and the ‘global’, of language and culture, and ways of being in the world based on dialogue, respect, and mutual recognition. We believe that educational policies and practices need to address and contribute to reducing inequalities in access to the linguistic and other cultural resources that are highly valued in the current global social and economic orders, while also contributing to reconfiguring linguistic and cultural hierarchies. In this vein, we refer to *critical cosmopolitanism* as an alternative model of competence and of citizenship which helps frame the analysis presented in the chapter and to draw conclusions from it as educators. The particular usage of the notion of critical cosmopolitanism that guides us was developed by Hawkins (2014, 2018), building from Appiah (2005), Delanty (2006) and Hansen (2010, 2014), among others, to refer to the ways linguistically and culturally diverse people encounter each other and relate in globalised scenarios, guided by ethical principles of care, respect, openness, and non-linguistic/cultural essentialism. Critical cosmopolitanism constructs the ‘global citizen’ as reflexive, dialogic, and empathetic, creating possibilities for social justice and an alternative to the neoliberal ‘citizen-worker’.

Furthermore, in accounting for the complexities of communication cutting across different borders (cultural, linguistic, modal), we adopt the theoretical and methodological postulates of *transmodalities* (Hawkins, 2018) to explore both the semiotic *processes* of making and transforming meanings across time and space, as well as the *effects* – including the ethical implications – of such semiosis. The data presented and analysed in this chapter were collected

within an educational action and research project called Global StoryBridges (GSB).¹ GSB aims to promote transnational communication among groups of young people inhabiting different global contexts characterised by socio-economic inequalities, who establish relationships through the production and exchange of digital stories in English (considered the lingua franca) about their lived experiences. We analyse different sources of data gathered using ethnographic methods allowing the reconstruction of the critical incident caused by the controversial video. We conduct an analysis of the transmodal “complexities and tangles” (Hawkins, 2018, p. 60) of the incident, referring both to the semiotic assemblage of the film and to ethnographic data collected during and after the critical incident, to understand whether the project coordinator’s reading of the video fit the youth authors’ intent. We then reflect, from the standpoint of how the video would be received by the Ugandan partners, and considering the Catalan teenagers’ developing critical cosmopolitanism, on the ethicality of the coordinator’s actions. The analysis highlights the local embeddedness of, and the cultural models emergent from, the young people’s production, as well as the multiple implications of these for transnational/transcultural communication. The findings offer insight on how semiosis is built as it travels across peoples and spaces – on the new meanings that come about in the transnational/transcultural flow of communicative resources.

In the next section of the chapter, we develop the transmodalities framework, after which we introduce the Global StoryBridges project in more depth, and then present and analyse the research data. Finally, we offer some reflections on the complexities of transnational and intercultural communication among youth and the ethical dilemma encountered in the research discussed.

Theoretical framework

As we stated in the previous section, the analysis presented in this chapter is inspired theoretically and methodologically by the concept of *transmodalities* (Hawkins, 2018). ‘Transmodalities’ expands the notion of the ‘repertoire’ of communicative resources originally proposed by Gumperz (1964) and later developed by authors including Blommaert and Backus (2013) or Rymes (2014), and builds on the work on multimodality (Adami, 2016; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001; Kress, 2011; Jewitt, 2017), with particular respect to communication among those from diverse cultural (and often geographic) contexts, who may not share cultural meanings of semiotic resources. Through the *trans* prefix, Hawkins (2018) emphasises the complexities and entanglements inherent to multimodal, transcultural/transnational communication.

In developing the transmodalities framework, Hawkins unpacks five complexities, which we now describe briefly, as they will be expanded alongside the data in the analytical section of the chapter:

- *Complexity #1: Modes intertwined*, refers to the entangled quality of modes, or to how multimodal resources, while having meaning-making potential on their own, interact with one another to form novel meanings. This is, indeed, a basic assumption of social semiotic approaches to multimodality (see, for example, Toh, Lim & Adami, this volume).

¹See <http://www.globalstorybridges.com/>. Global StoryBridges is led by Professor Margaret R. Hawkins at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

- *Complexity #2: Relationship between modes, language and material objects*, refers to the de-privileging of language in semiosis, and the meaning-making potential of all actors – including nonhuman ones – in interaction (Latour, 2005).
- *Complexity #3: Production/assemblage, reception, and negotiation*, refers to the “arc of communication” (Hawkins, 2018, p. 61), or to the intent, agency, and consciousness in multimodal production, as well as to how meanings are negotiated and received in transcultural/transnational communication (in addition to the composition process).
- In *Complexity #4: Context and culture*, Hawkins refers to context, on the one hand, as endogenous to multimodal assemblages, so each assemblage provides the framework for components to be understood, and the context against which the next assemblage might be interpreted. On the other hand, context evokes “the local, translocal, and transnational places, spaces, and conditions of multimodal interactions and meaning-making, and the histories and trajectories of modal resources and engagements” (Hawkins, 2018, p. 62). In terms of culture, Hawkins offers a situated, critical, non-essentialist approach, and calls for ethnographic research to complement multimodal research (see also Kress, 2001), to fully comprehend the social and cultural processes inherent to multimodal communication.
- The fifth and final complexity unpacked by Hawkins, *Complexity #5: Transnationalism and relations of power*, refers to issues of status, privilege, and power in transcultural/transnational relations. Hawkins points here to issues of access to technologies facilitating communication, and to how social and cultural capital shape how multimodal meanings are produced and interpreted, and how people are positioned in this process.

In deepening our understanding of value-laden considerations that derive from the analysis of transmodalities, we draw on the concept of critical cosmopolitanism, which was already presented in the previous section of the chapter, and is deeply connected to the fifth complexity that addresses criticality and positioning in human communications and relations. Critical cosmopolitanism, as a critical approach to global citizenship and interculturality, helps delve further into the effects of semiosis in transnational/transcultural communication, including moral aspects; it offers “a lens for ethical consideration of dispositions, understandings, and interactions in situated human encounters and engagements” (Hawkins, 2018, p. 65). We employ it to critically consider the engagements of the participants in the project and their emerging relations with one another, and the educational implications of these.

In the following section of the chapter, we further introduce the Global StoryBridges project and the Catalan site.

Research setting

One of the characteristics of the Global StoryBridges project is that it takes place across different global sites outside of formal school spaces and schedules. Similar to other non-formal educational programs documented in the scholarly literature (e.g. Cole & The Distributed Literacy Consortium, 2006; Digiacoimo & Gutiérrez, 2016; Lee & Hawkins, 2008; Moore & Vallejo, 2018; Subero, Vujasinovic & Esteban-Guitart, 2017; Vázquez, 2003), Global StoryBridges harnesses the affordances of out-of-school times and spaces for reconfiguring roles and hierarchies inherent to formal education, allowing participants to enact agency as learners, and for supporting learners’ diverse resources for communicating and learning and their different funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff & González, 1992).

Global StoryBridges connects children and teenagers from different parts of the world through digital stories collaboratively created by groups of young people at each site. Each site is part of a cluster with similarly-aged participants. The digital stories should represent aspects of the young people's lives, and they are shared with participants from the other sites through the project's web platform. This platform also includes an asynchronous chat facility to exchange questions, comments, and answers about the video productions with other groups. All sites are supported by volunteer adult facilitators, although the process of digital story production and exchange is led by the young participants. Interactions at each site take place in the languages that the young people choose to use, although their final video productions are in English, the lingua franca shared by participants at all sites. The three main objectives of the Global StoryBridges project are: (1) to develop young people's critical cosmopolitanism by establishing cross-cultural dialogue and ethical, global, cultural awareness; (2) to develop languages and literacies, including English as the lingua franca among the participants; and (3) to develop digital competencies for engaging with others.

The various groups of young people participating in the project live in very different local contexts: some in wealthy, developed countries and others in developing countries (in Africa, Asia, Latin America, the United States and Europe); some in urban areas and others in rural villages; some have never left their village/town/city and others are migrants or refugees with extensive transnational experiences. The common denominator among all the young people participating in the project is that they live with the consequences of socioeconomic inequalities, which entail, among other aspects, little access to non-formal (foreign language) education or to international mobility. The majority do not speak English as a home language (including those participating from English-speaking countries).

The project site in Catalonia is located at the youth centre of a town in the industrial belt surrounding Barcelona. The town has a population of approximately 13,500 inhabitants, some of whom have family histories of migration from other regions of Spain and the world, and others of whom identify as Spanish or Catalan Romani or Gitanos. This diversity of roots is reflected in the group of young people who participate in Global StoryBridges at the site. Per capita income in the town is below the Catalan average and unemployment – especially youth unemployment – is higher. There are two secondary schools which underperform on the system-wide core competences tests taken by fourth grade students (approximately 15 years old). The results are especially low in English – more than half of the students at the two secondary schools were not meeting the minimum curricular standards for this language at the time of our research (Consell Superior d'Avaluació del Sistema Educatiu, 2018).

The Global StoryBridges site aims to offer equitable non-formal education, and English language education in particular, to students from the two secondary schools in the town. Approximately 12 young people per year, aged between 12 and 15 years of age, have participated in the project over the past several years. The young participants sign up voluntarily, usually following the recommendation made by their school English teachers to them and their classmates that they take up the opportunity to improve their English outside of school. The group meets once a week for two hours and is guided by two or three adult facilitators to produce and exchange digital stories. The project is led locally by three of the authors of this chapter, as well as by student volunteers.

Data and methodology

We focus on a video produced by the young Catalan participants to share with project peers from a rural village in Uganda, entitled *Love at the first shit*. Specifically, we consider the

production process and the implications of sharing the video, which represented a semiotic and ethical dilemma for the project leaders. Without access to ethnographic data that suggest otherwise, the video might be interpreted as telling a story about a homosexual relationship as, in one of the scenes, two actresses kiss. While in Spain homosexuality and same-sex marriage are legal, discrimination on the grounds of identity or sexual orientation is penalised, and diversity of sexual orientations was discursively constructed as ‘normal’ by the youth who participated in the project (see Fragment 9.3 in the analytical section of this chapter), possible allusion to homosexuality in the video produced might be considered controversial (Ho et al., 2017) in the context of the transnational exchange.

Indeed, existing laws in Uganda, which are remnants of British colonialism, criminalise homosexual behaviour with prison sentences of up to 14 years. In 2009, in a climate of public persecution of suspected homosexual people, the Ugandan Parliament passed a resolution allowing a private member’s bill to strengthen laws against homosexuality, which included the death penalty for certain sexual practices. Following intense international pressure and several years of parliamentary debate, a ‘watered down’ version of the bill was signed into law in 2014, which removed the death penalty as punishment, but which established life imprisonment for homosexuality, and shorter prison sentences for people found guilty of supporting the LGBTQ+ community. The law was invalidated by the Ugandan constitutional court that same year, although a culture of extreme and violent homophobia persists (Boyd, 2019).

Given the potential risk that the Ugandan youth and adult facilitators would find the topic taboo (see also Amendoeira & Nascimento, this volume) or face social consequences if they had engaged with the video, including that their project site might be shut down, the decision was made by the project coordinator to remove it from the Global StoryBridges web platform before it was viewed by them. In the next section of this chapter, we consider the data following the structure of Hawkins’ five transmodal complexities. Besides the video production itself, we draw on other data collected ethnographically: the observations of one of the local project leaders who was present during the creation of the video; an interview after the critical incident between this local project leader and one of the volunteer facilitators of the group from Catalonia; an exchange of messages in WhatsApp between this facilitator and another who had accompanied the group that created the video, which was shared with the local project leaders; and a focus group interview after the critical incident with the group of young people who participated in the project. The interactional data sources are presented and analysed using basic conversation analytic methods (e.g., taking into account the sequentiality of turns), while the analysis of the visual data considers the semiotic resources that are made relevant by participants across data sources in building their different understandings of the video.

Analysis

Before proceeding with the analysis of the five complexities, we first describe the critical moments in the Catalan youths’ video production, *Love at the first shit*, represented as screenshots in Figures 9.1 to 9.10. The video lasts 1 minute 28 seconds and was produced, according to the opening credits, by a fictitious production company called Pamela Films S.A. (Pamela Films Inc. in English). In commenting on the video data, we use third person plural pronouns to be gender neutral.



Figure 9.1



Figure 9.2



Figure 9.3



Figure 9.4



Figure 9.5



Figure 9.6



Figure 9.7



Figure 9.8



Figure 9.9



Figure 9.10

After the opening credits and the film title, the story begins with two characters: one wearing a white sweater who is standing still (who we will call character one) and the other dressed in

black who is walking towards character one (who we will call character two) (Figure 9.1). When the characters come face to face, character two almost steps in a pile of excrement (Figure 9.2). In Figure 9.3, character two falls onto character one and character one reacts verbally in a voice that has been edited to be slow and deep.

Figures 9.4 and 9.5 take place one day later, with character two telling a different group of characters about the incident, including reporting on the verbal exchange that was produced, and all the characters laughing. In Figure 9.6, character one walks onto the scene, accompanied by another new character, and is spotted by character two, who exclaims “look!”. In Figure 9.7, character one appears to flirt with character two by running a hand through their hair, as if combing a toupee, and blowing a kiss. In Figure 9.8, character two’s companions physically encourage character two to go to character one by pushing them.

Figure 9.9 represents a scene that takes place one week later: characters one and two both walk towards the centre of the frame – and thus towards each other – and both almost step in a pile of excrement. After some close-up shots of the pile of excrement and of the two characters’ faces, accompanied by romantic music, in Figure 9.10 characters one and two kiss. After this, the final credits appear on the screen.

We now analyse the process of video production and reception in more depth. The analysis focuses on the different intended and received meanings of the video and affords input for critical reflection on the ethical arguments for sharing or removing the young people’s creative production from circulation.

Complexity #1: Modes intertwined

The first complexity refers to the entanglement of different modes, and how different semiotic resources combine to create meaning. If we observe, for example, the screenshots in Figures 9.3 and 9.4, we see how different signifiers within the visual frame come together to build meaning. The appearance of character one (who is wearing a white sweater) – their clothes, haircut, physique, and facial features – seems to indicate that they are a girl. However, character one’s voice when character two stumbles (Figure 9.3) has been edited and might be heard as masculine. Furthermore, the pronoun used orally by character two in Figure 9.4 to refer to character one is “he”, which also appears in the subtitles, thus suggesting that character one is masculine. Finally, the two main characters’ gestures could be interpreted as being gendered. For example, the way character one runs their hand through their hair, as if combing a toupee, and then blows a kiss to character two, evoke prototypical images of a gallant male. Similarly, after being blown the kiss, character two and their companions shout and gesticulate, also evoking prototypical images of a group of young girls. We are fully aware that this interpretation of the characters’ gestures, based on traditional, stereotypical gender roles (e.g., the ‘gallant’ man), is clearly questionable and reductionist, although we include it for consideration as we believe it is one of the interpretations available to those viewing the video.

As we see in the analysis of this first complexity, the information provided by each signifier may be contradictory. However, the interlacing of them affords various possible interpretations in relation to the gender of the characters. Character one could be male, as suggested by their stereotypical gestures, the use of the pronoun “he” in referring to them, etc., although the gender of the actress playing character two suggests that the character is female. The makers of the video, who are learners of English, might have made a mistake in saying and writing the pronoun “he” instead of “she”. Character one could be transsexual, a male gendered character in a female biological body. These possibilities might also be transferred to character two, as well as to the rest of the characters. As we continue with the analysis, we will present

ethnographic data that help better understand which of these possible interpretations was intended by the young creators.

Complexity #2: Relationship between modes, language and material objects

The second complexity refers to the fact that, in multimodal communication, language loses centrality and is placed on par with other semiotic resources in the configuration of meaning (Hawkins, 2018). An example of this is reflected in the interpretation of the video made by the (North American) coordinator of the project, in which some of the visual (e.g., the female appearance of the two main characters, their gesticulation) and auditory (e.g., their shouting) resources – had greater weight than other available visual, linguistic, and auditory resources. This led her to understand that the kiss implied a homosexual relationship which prompted the decision to remove the video from the project’s website. We include part of the email that the coordinator sent to the volunteer facilitators and project leaders at the Catalan site, which reflects the prominence of the visual signs in her reading of the video production (see Fragment 9.1). Line numbers and bold type have been added to the fragment by the chapter authors to support the analysis.

01 “I’m so sorry- but I’ve had to delete the video that you posted [...]
 02 **homosexuality** is illegal and taboo in Uganda. A few years ago they
 03 passed a law that anyone found guilty of homosexuality would be put
 04 to death. The majority of Ugandans agreed with that law, but there was
 05 such a big international outcry, and sanctions, that they changed it, so
 06 now if you’re found guilty of homosexuality it’s ‘only’ a mandatory
 07 sentence of life in prison. I know that your kids could not know this,
 08 and the culture is certainly different [...], but I don’t think we want
 09 to post **a video with girls (or boys) kissing one another** – it’s just
 10 too sensitive, and the exchange is too new.”

Fragment 9.1: Extract from email send by project coordinator to Catalan site facilitators and leaders

Despite the possible interpretations discussed in *Complexity #1*, the coordinator does not seem to notice those resources that do not match her interpretation of ‘gender of actor = gender of character’ when viewing the video, leading her to conclude, without a doubt, that characters one and two were female (line 9) and, therefore, that the video showed a homosexual relationship (line 2). Based on this interpretation, the project coordinator justifies her decision to withdraw the video for two main reasons: homosexuality in Uganda is illegal and taboo (line 2); and the exchange between the young people in Catalonia and Uganda was too nascent to introduce a controversial subject (line 10), including homosexuality between girls or boys (line 9).

The consequences of allowing the Ugandan participants to view the video could have involved harm by exposing them to a social fact that was socially disapproved of in their local context, and which could have led to their abandoning the project. Indeed, the project coordinator’s fears about the potential risk of the Ugandan site being shut down over the video were confirmed by the Ugandan site’s leader in subsequent conversations about the critical incident.

Complexity #3: Production/assemblage, reception, and negotiation

The third complexity refers to the existence of an “arc of communication” (Hawkins, 2018, p. 61), which encompasses intention, agency and consciousness in multimodal production, and

how meanings are negotiated and received. Semiotic processes are highly context sensitive and transformative as they travel through this arc and new contextual realities and participants are involved. We may ask if the intention of the young people during the creation of the video, and the way it was interpreted by the project coordinator, match.

We rely on the ethnographic data available to us to reconstruct this arc of communication. In Fragment 9.2, we reproduce part of the exchange of messages in WhatsApp between the volunteer facilitator who worked directly with the young authors of the video (whom we refer to as “O”) and another facilitator who contacted him to ask about the critical incident (who we refer to as “I”). The screenshots of the conversation in WhatsApp are not available to us as researchers as the facilitators shared only a text version of the exchange with us, which is included here as it was received; only turn numbers and bold type have been added by the chapter authors to support the analytical narrative. While we are aware of the complexities of turn-taking in WhatsApp conversations (e.g., Pratginestós & Masats, 2021), the absence of timecodes in the data received means we are unable to reconstruct turn-taking exactly as it occurred, although we have made our best guess as to when turns start and end (i.e., when a complete utterance was sent).

- 01 O: in the script it said one girl and one boy fall in love
 02 We choose the cameras, actors and all the roles randomly
 03 Then, with the 5 actors we asked. Who wants to be the girl? Who
 wants to be the boy?
 04 And they raised their hand
 05 (We had read the script before so they knew about the kiss)
 06 So they decided that the boy was an actress. **Nobody thought it was
 weird as it was just theatre**
- 07 I: Okeyy then it wasn't because there was a lack of boy actors
 right? Or because (boy's name) said: nonono, I dont want to do the
 scene of the kiss
- 8 O: Noo
 9 **The two girls wanted to be the main characters**
 10 **And the rest of the actors agreed**

Fragment 9.2: Extract from the WhatsApp exchange between two of the volunteer facilitators at the Catalan site

From the exchange of messages between the facilitators, we learn that the character roles – as well as those of director, camera technicians, etc. – were assigned to different youth participants after a script had been written, and were based on the young people's interests (turns 1-6). Thus, the fact that the two main roles were played by females was coincidental and had more to do with the desires of the youth (turns 9-10) than with the script. Thus, the young people did not create their video with the intention that was interpreted by the project coordinator. That being so, it must be kept in mind that whatever the Catalan youth meant to communicate when creating the video, if the participants from the Ugandan site had received a video with potentially homosexual content, they would have been exposed to harm.

It is necessary to describe the production process followed by the young people in Catalonia in more detail. Following the guidelines of the Global StoryBridges project, the videos produced by the youth at the different global sites are generally autobiographical and documentary in nature. The young people in Uganda shared videos with the participants in Catalonia in which

they took part in school or religious activities or did daily chores. The first videos by the young people in Catalonia also represented the activities they did after school, but soon after they decided to create a fictitious film production company (i.e. Pamela Films, S.A.), in which they took turns taking on the roles of scriptwriters, directors, camera technicians, actor/actress, thus deviating from making autobiographical videos and documentaries to making fictional films, doing what the facilitator describes in Fragment 9.2 as “just theatre” (turn 6).

The arc of semiosis of the video in question must therefore take into account the distance between the intentions of the young people from Catalonia – to create a fictional film in which two actresses played a boy and a girl – and the expectations of reality with which the Ugandan youth might have interpreted the video as a literal and real event – two girls from the site in Catalonia kissing. This distance could have been reinforced by the fact that, to the best of our knowledge (accumulated through years of ethnographic work at the Ugandan site), the young people from rural Uganda had limited contact with fictional audiovisual genres, unlike their counterparts in Catalonia, who are considerable consumers of such products.

Complexity #4: Context and culture

The notion of the arc of communication links to the next complexity described by Hawkins, which refers to the primordial role of context and culture. In exploring this complexity, we refer to the concept of “normal” as it was constructed by the young people in Catalonia during the group discussion that took place after the elimination of the video from the web platform. The focus group involved two of the local project leaders (referred to as Adult 1 and Adult 2) and young participants (referred to as Youth 1, Youth 2, Youth 3, Youth 4). In Fragment 9.3 we reproduce a transcribed extract of the conversation (using simplified Jeffersonian conventions). The conversation took place in Spanish and both the original and the translated versions (*italics under the original*) of the talk are included.

- 01 Adult 1: pero nuestra duda es que (.) es si hicimos bien (.)
 02 retirando eso? (.) y si lo entendistéis? (.) por qué se retiró? (.)
 03 y si os parecía justo?
but our doubt is whether (.) is whether we did the right thing (.)
removing that? and if you understood? (.) why it was removed? (.)
and if you thought it was fair?
- 04 ((overlapping speech))
 05 Youth 1: pero si (.) si aquí es (.) ((quotation mark gesture)) normal (.)
 06 hm ellos tienen que [ver
but if (.) if here it's (.) ((quotation mark gesture)) normal (.)
hm they have to [see
- 07 Youth 2: [allí (.) allí también nos enviaban videos de
 08 algo que para nosotros no no es normal
[there (.) there they also sent us videos of
something that for us was not was not normal.
- 09 Adult 1: qué? cómo por ejemplo?
what? what for example?
- 10 Youth 3: [llevar comida en la cabeza
[carrying food on their head
- 11 Youth 4: [que cocinan pero o sea al aire libre
[that they cook but like outside
- 12 Youth 3: ((placing hands on head)) llevan cosas en la cabeza
((placing hands on head)) they carry things on their head
 ((overlapping voices))

- 13 Youth 3: sí y nosotros (no lo vemos mal).
yes and we (don't see it as a bad thing).
- 14 Youth 4: es su (.) es su cultura pero nosotros lo vemos extraño porque
 15 no lo hacemos aquí (.) igual que aquí pues ().
*it's their (.) it's their culture but we see it as strange because
 we don't do it here. (.) the same as here well ().*
- 16 Youth 1: ellos () que una chica y una chica () que un chico y un
 17 chico (.) para nosotros es normal.
*they () that a girl and a girl () that a boy and
 a boy (.) for us it's normal.*

Fragment 9.3: Extract from the focus group meeting between local project leaders and youth

The fragment begins with one of the adult participants asking the youth if the coordinator had done the right thing by removing the video, if the young people had understood the reasons it was removed, and whether they thought it was fair (lines 1-3). After some inaudible, overlapping speech, one of the youth begins her turn with a “but” preface, suggesting disagreement with the coordinator’s actions, and continues to claim that if “here” (i.e., in Catalonia) “it” (i.e., homosexuality) is “normal”, “they” (i.e., the Ugandans) need to understand that (lines 5-6). The youth’s use of ‘air quotes’ when saying “normal” is interesting, as it suggests the notion of normality is potentially controversial. In lines 7-8, another young person speaks up in overlap, to claim that “they” (i.e., the Ugandans) also sent the Catalan team videos of things that were “not normal” for them. In line 9, one of the adults asks the youth to expand on this idea of normality by giving examples of what for them is “not normal”. The youth provide these examples in lines 10 (“carrying food on their head”, 11 (“cooking but like outside”), and 12 (“carry things on their head”), referring to aspects represented in previous videos shared by the Ugandans which had surprised them. In the following lines, the youth continue to construct their idea of normality as being “strange” (line 14) in the sense that it is not from “here” (line 15), while not being “a bad thing” (line 13) and being related to “culture” (line 14). In lines 16 and 17, one of the Catalan youth affirms that, for them, relationships between boys and between girls are “normal”, now without ‘air-quotes’, suggesting that while the concept of “normal” is itself contested, possibly because it is cultural, the normality of homosexuality for the Catalan teens is not.

Thus, when asked about the adequacy or otherwise of the decision to withdraw their film from circulation, the young people evoke the category of “normal” to refer both to the normality of homosexuality in their own culture, as well as to aspects of the Ugandan youths’ culture that they see as equally “normal” although different. From here, the Catalan youth build the idea that if they are able to accept that “normal” for the Ugandan youth was to carry objects on their heads (lines, 2, 10 and 13) or prepare meals outside (line 11), their counterparts should be able to accept that homosexuality is “normal” for the Catalan youth.

Without ignoring the positive implications of the critical exercise of relativising normality as a culturally embedded and therefore fluid category, as the young Catalans arguably do, their discourse does not engage with the fifth and final complexity described by Hawkins, which includes issues of status, privilege, and power. We now consider this aspect.

Complexity #5: Transnationalism and relations of power

The final complexity is decisive for unpacking the ethical dilemma that arose and the actions taken in relation to *Love at the first shit*. What kinds of power relationships or inequalities would have been generated if the video had been viewed by the Ugandan youth and their adult facilitators? What would the repercussions have been for all parties involved if the coordinator had decided to act one way or another?

For the Catalan youth, our ethnographic work suggests that the repercussions of the withdrawal of the video were disappointment and frustration at not being able to share their work. However, being able to discuss the ethical dilemma with the facilitators and local project leaders might also have had positive consequences for them in terms of cultural understandings gained and the potential for developing their critical cosmopolitanism, for example by gaining an understanding of the cultural embeddedness of normality, and the need for care in encountering cultural others. We do not have data to suggest that this was actually the case, although we do acknowledge the important educational affordances of the critical incident for the Catalan youth.

For the Ugandan team, however, the risks of engaging with the video in any sense were very high, regardless of whether the group from Catalonia intended to portray a homosexual relationship or not. Allowing the Ugandan participants to view and comment on the video, on the grounds of respecting the creative expression of the Catalan youth or celebrating their understandings of homosexuality as “normal” in their own cultural context, could have introduced a taboo and/or put the Ugandan team at risk of violent persecution, or have a series of undesirable consequences for them and for the Global StoryBridges project. In short, removing the video from circulation was the only moral course of action available to the project coordinator.

Final reflections

The preceding analysis has traced the process of young people’s production and sharing of a digital story and highlights the contextual and cultural embeddedness of semiosis and the new, complex meanings that emerge in the transnational flow of communicative resources. The transmodalities framework highlighted the key role of elements including entanglement, context, culture, or power in the way semiotic resources are articulated in the production and reception of the audiovisual content. We have also shown how ethnography and the analysis of different interactional instances were essential to extending the multimodal analysis of the digital product as a semiotic artefact on its own, in order to fully appreciate intended and interpreted meanings. In doing so, we have critically reflected on ethical arguments for sharing or removing the young people’s creative production from circulation.

The critical incident examined exemplifies a common dilemma of our time: as local contexts become increasingly interconnected and transformed through globalisation, mobility, and digital technologies, it is inevitable that the semiotic processes that emerge from communicative exchanges will be intertwined with different ways of seeing and understanding the world. Considering social facts that revealed themselves to be controversial at the transnational scale – gender and sexuality – has allowed us to reflect on how to reconcile the promotion of creativity and critical thinking, on the one hand, with the ethical concern of not causing harm to others, on the other. It should be noted that although the removal of the video and the termination of the transnational exchange mean that we are unable to know for certain how the Ugandan youth would have interpreted it themselves, sustained and ongoing dialogue with their adult facilitators and many years of ethnographic work at the Ugandan site suggest that the assumptions made by the project coordinator are empirically supported and not based on a hegemonic understanding of Ugandan youth.

We have argued that critical cosmopolitanism can serve the reconciliation of creativity, criticality and ethicality. By articulating the local and the global through relationships based on mutual recognition, care, respect and empathy, critical cosmopolitanism provides an promising approach for framing the intercultural citizen. Applied to the dilemma presented in this article, the notion of critical cosmopolitanism, as a lens for the ethical consideration of the complexities that arise when people connect across borders (cultural, linguistic, modal, etc.), also helps justify the decision to withdraw the video from circulation, regardless of the meaning intended by the Catalan youth.

This experience has taught us that, despite aiming for the digital storytelling process to be led by the young participants, pedagogical intervention is needed to develop openness, critical awareness, and caring dispositions among young people. Transnational/transcultural communication entails certain manageable risks and critical cosmopolitanism does not develop through osmosis alone – that is, through simply connecting different groups and allowing them to work through their cultural differences. Critical incidents such as the one described here could be harnessed as opportunities for growth by involving young people in critical reflection processes – by engaging them in discussion on other ways of being in the world, and on the ethical implications of communicating with others.

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