

**‘It just opened my eyes a bit more’:
Student engagement with Instagram to develop understanding of
complex concepts**

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Abstract

How can we make use of image-based social media to develop students’ critical engagement with concepts like equality and diversity? In this paper, I draw on bell’ hooks’ description of liberatory theorizing to discuss findings from a project that involved 60 2nd year BA education students taking and sharing photographs through Instagram as part of their learning on a sociology module underpinned by a critical pedagogy approach. Thematic analysis applied to ten interviews with student participants shows that while the project supported students to connect everyday experiences with abstract concepts, their criticality was hindered by the perception of the task as one of ‘capturing’ unambiguous representations of concepts. The findings highlight that if we are to use popular image-based social media sites as part of a critical pedagogy approach, we need to be prepared to support students in using the visual mode as part of liberatory theorizing.

Keywords: social media, visual literacy, critical pedagogy, mobile learning, situated learning, multimodality

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Introduction

In a critical pedagogy approach, theory is important because it enables us to interrogate our everyday experiences and the social systems and structures that shape these experiences. Those practising critical pedagogy have experimented with modes and media that can enable learners to more readily make connections between everyday experiences and abstract concepts. Freire himself used photographs (taken by him) as a way to facilitate theoretically-driven critiques of the world around us. What then are the potentials of image-based social media in relation to the aims of critical pedagogy? As our everyday lives become increasingly saturated with images (Kress, 2009; Bezemer & Kress, 2015), we need to closely observe what happens when students are invited to integrate images, via popular social media platforms, into their learning and theorizing practices. This paper explores how undergraduate students in an Education department engaged with taking photographs and sharing them through the online social media platform *Instagram* in order to extend their critical understanding of central concepts in a module entitled 'Equality and Diversity in Education'. It considers students' perceptions and experiences of the project and the significance of this in relation to a critical pedagogy approach.

The following section offers a theoretical framing of the paper, focusing firstly on the potential role of images as part of a critical pedagogy approach – and particularly bell hooks' conceptualisation of 'liberatory theorizing', and secondly on conceptualisations of multimodal literacy that encourage us to explore the flow of ideas across different modes and media as part of learning. Before outlining the study design and findings, I present some of the background literature on the role of photography and art-making within applied critical pedagogy projects, and then explore the literature that surrounds the use of social media in higher education learning contexts.

Theoretical framing: critical pedagogy, liberatory theorizing and multimodal literacies

In a critical pedagogy approach, teachers and learners share and develop tools that can be used to deconstruct the mechanisms of oppression and domination that exist within society. A foundational account of critical pedagogy is offered in Freire's (1972/1968) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which expresses the need for students to take more ownership over 'knowledge', and rather than seeing it as something divorced from their everyday contexts, reclaim conceptual understanding as a fundamental tool in raising consciousness and in active struggle against oppressive structures and forces. Freire suggests that teachers facilitating more academic ownership among students can use photographs to support with this. He describes presenting photographs of everyday life to students and engaging students in a critical dialogue about what they can see and the various social concerns to which the photograph relates. Through this process, students connect abstract concepts with everyday experiences.

Critical pedagogy positions theory as deeply personal and affective. bell hooks describes theory as a 'place of healing' since theorising offers us a way to interrogate our everyday experiences and demand better for ourselves and others around us (hooks, 2003, 2004). In her discussions of feminist theory, bell hooks describes how the theory 'emerges from the concrete, from my efforts to make sense of everyday life experiences, from my efforts to intervene critically in my life and the lives of others' (hooks, 2003, p. 71). The connections that arise between our lived experiences and theorizing are part of a back and forth process, a constantly shifting dialogue (hooks,

2003, 2014). This contrasts with situations in which theories are taken whole-sale and neatly packaged and imposed onto what we see around us. This use of theory is not liberatory, but confining since it involves organising experiences according to whatever others have said, and dismissing the experiences that do not align or accommodate. Thus, the nature of the connections that we make between abstract concepts and our everyday experiences are paramount. In liberatory theorizing, lived experience comes first and theory is actively put to work in helping us to make sense of these experiences.

Building on Freire's use of images as a practical way to connect students' everyday experiences with their conceptual understanding, image-based social media has the potential to support the connections that underpin liberatory theorizing. The emphasis on the visual mode in critical pedagogy might be even more relevant to students in contemporary society, given the prevalence of images in our everyday communication as a result of the growth of online experiences and of social media in particular (Bezemer & Kress, 2015). Kress (2009) suggests that images have become the most dominant mode of communication in the digital era. For our students, most of whom are younger than 25, communicating through images might be a step closer to their everyday experiences and literacy practices. While we need to be careful about taking up the 'digital native' myth (see Selwyn, 2009; Selwyn & Stirling, 2016), it is likely that students who have grown up in a digital era and often curate their own image-based social media profiles as part of their personal lives, will feel a sense of ownership over the practices of creating and sharing information via digital images. This might enable a more fluid dialogue in students' minds between what we encounter in our everyday lives and the sociological concepts as they are presented in university lectures and seminars.

New Literacy Studies places a focus on the flow of communication, information and literacy practices across times and space. Burnett et al. (2014) and Burnett et al. (2018) trace the myriad ways that literacy practices move across different spaces and places, and the material and immaterial dimensions that these comprise. By following these flows, they investigate the actual and potential openings that exist between the more formalised literacy practices in educational settings, and students' everyday literacy practices, and how these practices are constantly enfolded and enmeshed. A

focus on multimodal literacy does not only allow us to chart the literacy practices of learners, but also to explore and open up new ways of engaging in learning. If we hope to develop students' conceptual understanding and nourish the links between their everyday experiences and critical social theory, one way to achieve this might be to disrupt or unsettle the flow of academic literacy practices across different spaces, modes and media as it currently exists. This is what was attempted in the learning project outlined in this paper.

Background

The following two sections briefly review 1) the ways in which the visual mode has been taken up and used in projects underpinned by critical pedagogy aims and 2) research on social media in higher education learning, focusing particularly on the potentials and pitfalls of projects using social media in relation to the aims of the project presented in this article.

Photography in critical pedagogy

Previous research demonstrates that photography can play an important role in students' critically reflecting on their everyday experiences and the preconceptions that structure these experiences. For example, Swarts (2014) described the use of photography in partnered social studies classrooms across the world to enable students to gain insights into the lives of those living in other countries and to problematize their assumptions about others. Similarly, Aranda et al. (2015) used photography with trainee mental health nurses to help make visible their implicit beliefs about different cultural groups in the local community, and to act as a starting point for deconstructing these implicit beliefs

There is also a significant tradition in research of using photography to help students share and critically reflect on their own experiences of education. Photovoice has been developed as a particular approach to embedding photography within projects of raising consciousness (Purcell, 2009). Zenkov et al. (2013) and Marquez-Zenkov and Harmon (2007) conducted photovoice projects with students that enabled students to engage in deep collaborative reflection about their experiences of learning, school and

community.. Interestingly, these projects have all relied on the discussion that surrounds photographs, rather than the image-taking itself, as the key to critical reflection and problematizing preconceptions. This is relevant to the study presented in this article because it highlights the need to look carefully at both the image-taking and the image-sharing processes and consider how they might feed into liberatory theorizing.

Social media and higher education: potentials and pitfalls

Research conducted by Gikas and Grant (2013) with university students suggests that students tend to blur the academic potentials of social media and mobile learning more generally. Thus, when we consider the potentials of using social media in a project such as the one presented in this article, it is appropriate to consider what research on mobile learning has demonstrated more generally. Optimistic conceptualisations of mobile learning have described it as 'anytime and anywhere learning' (Mottiwalla, 2007, p. 2), emphasising how mobile learning enables learners to make connections across formal and informal learning contexts (Vavoula et al., 2007). For Traxler (2010) and Greenhow (2011) the significance of mobile learning is in the context-aware nature of the interaction as learning can be made more specific to the learner's context and therefore feel more meaningful and connected with authentic everyday experiences. This is clearly relevant to the aims of a critical pedagogy approach, where the focus is on enabling learners to make use of abstract concepts as a way of problematizing the world around them.

Research on the perceptions of students of mobile learning have highlighted particular opportunities for heightened engagement. In a study by Gikas and Grant (2013) involving focus group interviews with students across three universities in the US, the advantages highlighted by the students were a) the immediate access to information, b) the constant connectivity with the learning experience and c) the situated nature of the learning experience. The final characteristic is emphasised in a systematic analysis conducted by Pimmer, Mateescu & Grohbiel (2016). They suggest that 'hybrid' designs whereby learners created multimodal representations of learning via mobile devices, supported students to connect theoretical learning with everyday experiences. The construction of visual representations (photographs, video

recordings) was found to be helpful to students' learning in a number of studies (e.g. Zahn et al., 2013).

Social media engagement as part of HE learning is not always perceived by students and/or lecturers to be successful (Selwyn & Stirling, 2016). For example, Lackovic, Kerry, Lowe and Lowe (2017) found that students were intimidated at the thought of putting their thoughts into the public domain via Twitter, as part of a social media learning initiative on a physiology course. Students saw Twitter as 'a platform for the more knowledgeable, experienced and powerful' (p. 45). The students positioned themselves as 'subordinates' and essentially silenced themselves in this sphere; this occurred despite the fact that it was in the context of an initiative designed to empower and give voice to the students. Social media in HE contexts comes with a complex bundle of expectations and associations, and can be seen by students as anti-academic (Stirling, 2016). Other researchers are careful to stress that the overarching learning design is more important than the devices that are involved in the learning experience (Laurillard, 2009; Pimmer et al., 2016; Lai et al., 2016).

Research questions

- 1) How do students perceive a project that involves taking and sharing photographs via Instagram as part of the learning process? How do these perceptions relate to theoretical framing offered by liberatory theorizing, critical pedagogy and multimodal literacies?
- 2) How do students go about the process of taking and sharing photographs as part of this project? How do the students' practices as part of the project relate to the practices of critical pedagogy – in particular, liberatory theorizing as described by hooks?

About the research

In order to explore the questions above, 60 second year students on the programme BA Education Studies completing a sociological module around the themes of equality and diversity, participated in a project that involved taking and sharing photographs relating to the central concepts of the module. Through workshop sessions built into

their normal contact time, the students were introduced to taking photographs relating to different concepts from the module, sharing these photographs through Instagram, and discussing them as part of the contact time learning experience. They tagged the photographs in relation to the core concepts from the module, which included #gender, #heteronormativity, #power, #cultural capital, #capitalism, #hegemony and so on. The project was underpinned by a commitment to critical pedagogy, in which students would take more ownership over the theoretical abstract concepts and see these as ways in which to critique and problematize their own experiences in the world around them (Freire, 1972/1968, Freire, 2014/1990; hooks, 2003; hooks, 2014), a commitment to multimodal literacies (Kress, 2009; Bezemer & Kress, 2015) and the ways in which multimodal literacy can be used to value students' own 'funds of knowledge' (Moll et al., 1992; Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014; Snowball & McKenna, 2017). It was hoped that students' expertise in relation to multimodal representations and interactions via social media would create disruptions in the traditional hierarchies of learning and teaching in the university (Stirling, 2014; Hanson, 2009).

The research project was funded by the university in which it occurred as part of a wider aim to explore and innovate creative digital pedagogies. The project team comprised academics and two undergraduate student researchers, who had completed the module the previous year and were more 'in touch' with the student experiences. As part of the project, we conducted a survey of all students at the end of the course, conducted ten interviews with a selection of the cohort, and the student researchers made written and visual field notes at each taught session. The findings in this paper stem from the data produced through the semi-structured interviews with ten participants. We took care to ensure that the students selected represented a range of levels of participation in the project. We included those that had been observed to participate eagerly, those that participated less frequently, and those that showed some visible disdain towards the project. The students interviewed moved in different friendship circles and were not in regular discussion with each other.

I applied a bottom-up thematic analysis to the interview transcripts. However, I do not conceptualise the themes I developed through this process as a representative and comprehensive catalogue of 'what was said', but instead I see them as relating to interesting lines of thought that can be helpful to us in understanding student experiences in projects such as these and in designing future learning activities. Thus,

while on a procedural level I broadly applied the typical steps of a thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006; identifying key words and phrases, organising key words and phrases in relation to each other, naming themes), my overarching intention was to use this process as a way of spending reflective time with the data. MacLure (2013) discusses how the process of coding can be used as a way of engaging deeply with data, but does not necessarily exist as part of a process of categorising and hierarchizing information. MacLure (2010, 2011) presents the possibilities of an analytical approach guided more by affect and the way in which particular segments of interview data come to 'glow' in the experience of the researcher. These are the 'data hotspots' and they are points from which we can generate multiple offshoots and 'lines of flight'. This is the spirit of the analysis that follows.

In this article, I share those themes that relate particularly to critical pedagogy, liberatory theorizing and multimodal literacies. This is therefore not a comprehensive catalogue of the findings from research, but instead a starting point for theoretically-driven discussions about pedagogy. Although the themes are separated and named for the sake of offering a point of access to readers; they are not intended as a representation of 'real life'. The following lines of thought are intertwined and messy in the context of everyday interactions:

1. Image-based social media in relation to student identity
2. Connections between everyday life and abstract concepts in situated learning
3. Conceptualising the task as 'capturing' concepts
4. Class discussions versus online discussion

Below each of these four themes is commented on, illustrated through quotes and discussed in relation to the theoretical framing presented previously

Image-based social media in relation to student identity Some students had positive feelings about the project because they already enjoyed taking photographs and associated this activity with their personal identity and competence. Since the lecturers on the module were new to using Instagram, this had the potential to impact in interesting ways on the traditional learner-teacher hierarchy (Stirling, 2014).

It was actually quite interesting because I like taking photographs (C)

I already have Instagram anyway on my own personal account, so I thought, oh this is great, I know exactly what to do (G)

On the other hand, other students felt that the project centred around zones of discomfort (e.g. social media, photography, Instagram in particular) and did not feel a relationship between the project and their personal identity. The project involved yet another set of skills that they needed to learn, in addition to the myriad other academic literacy skills that they potentially felt overwhelmed by:

I was a little worried because I'm not very good at taking photos (J)

I'm not really a social media person (A)

I don't really have the time if I'm honest. I don't really use Instagram (H)

These comments demonstrate the importance of resisting the 'digital native' myth laid out by Prensky (2001) and the assumption that young people at university will automatically feel comfortable in digital environments and engaging in digital activities (Selwyn, 2009). Students are heterogeneous and will each bring their own associations to the particular activity and platform that has been chosen.

Having said this, there was still the potential within this project for traditional hierarchies to be unsettled, since the lecturers were unfamiliar with Instagram and were also learning how to use it. Furthermore, the sense of 'doing something different' was an invitation to taking an alternative approach and opening new forms of dialogue between learners and teachers.

...a nice take on how to do something differently compared to what we've been doing before (F)

It was actually going out there and doing something, so I suppose it's not boring (I)

I like the fact that we went outside last week, that was quite nice and I think it's just made the module a bit more relaxed and I feel like I understand things a bit more (G)

The last two comments relate to getting 'out there' and leaving the physical confines of the classroom. This suggests that perhaps unfamiliar physical environments (or at least environments not typically associated with learning, such as the café space in the university or the outdoor grassy area) prompt an affective shift. Although it is these environments, and not the digital environment of Instagram, that prompts this shift, we can recognise that digital mobile platforms open up the possibilities for learning and connecting learning across alternative physical environments (Burnett et al., 2014; Burnett et al., 2018). Situated learning is one of the most celebrated potentials of mobile learning (Mottiwalla, 2007; Traxler, 2010), with the opportunity to make connections between abstract concepts and meaningful, authentic contexts that play a part in the student's everyday life. The students' comments in this study highlight the embodied nature of situated learning, the way in which movement – walking, running, bending down, crouching and so on – plays an essential part in the heightened engagement that can come from situated learning, and can foster connections between abstract concepts and the physical environment (Author, 2014; Author, 2016). Affective, somatic and sensory dimensions of experiences come to the fore in bell hooks' conceptualisation of liberatory theorizing as a deeply personal process. As hooks (2003) suggests: 'dislocation [physical and social dislocation] is the perfect context for free-flowing thought that lets us move beyond the restricted confines of a familiar social order' (p. 21). Therefore, when we think about constructing projects to support liberatory theorizing we might think not just in terms of disrupting the typical flow of ideas across modes, media and spaces, but also to think in terms of disrupting the typical affective flows that characterise the academic spaces of higher education.

Connections between everyday life and abstract concepts in situated learning

The students described how the project gave them an opportunity to see a familiar environment, in this case the university, through a different lens:

I think me and my friend, we started, we just went round uni for a bit and then I became more aware of things that were relevant to the project and thought, oh, I could do that. And so yeah I was more aware by the end (G)

G and her friend were looking with fresh eyes at the physical environment of the university, engaging in what Sheets-Johnstone (1999) calls the process of 'making the familiar strange'. Similarly, one student described looking at the displays of children's toys and clothes in a supermarket and realising how deeply ingrained the gender stereotyping was in this context.

I went to a Tesco and I sort of looked at all their different toys and they had pink toys and you could almost see like um 'This is the boys' toys and 'this is the girls' toys', even though they didn't have a sign! (laughing) (J)

Talking more generally and abstractly about the potential of linking theoretical concepts learned about in an academic context with everyday experiences and circumstances, the students described it in physical and visual terms: looking around and opening their eyes:

I was looking into it more; instead of just seeing it as a picture on my wall I was thinking of the concept behind it yeah (laughing) (B)

...when you're reading about it or they're talking about it in class, you, you say 'Oh, this is just middle-class people think like this' and so on, but when you see it in, in reality, it just sort of deepens your understanding a little bit. (J)

Maybe I knew it all along, but it just opened my eyes a bit more (M)

It didn't change it [understanding] but it opened my mind (D)

It's just opened my view more; it's changed my views and my knowledge... now I can, I can look beyond it now. I can look more deeper in it. (A)

The students are describing in these comments a physical process, of lifting understanding and ideas out of the traditional academic contexts, and using them to inspire new forms of looking in places and contexts that are not associated with the work of theory. The connection between the abstract and the everyday is described as happening through the visual mode, through the process of looking: looking at, but also, as participant A describes, a process of 'looking beyond'. This resonates with the repetition of the words 'depth' and 'deep' by students to describe the contribution of the project to their learning:

It's just normal everyday things but then when you think about them a bit deeper, yeah you understand them (M)

I think like that you kind of looked more depth into it, more deeper into it, and then you kind of saw that there's actually more to it than like it seems like there really is (E)

What the students describe here as depth came about through the realisation of the relevance of theoretical concepts in the wider world. This change in perception or orientation did not necessarily equate with a more sophisticated or fluent or lengthy verbal explanation but instead a sense of connectedness.

Conceptualising the task as 'capturing' concepts

Students made many comments that suggested that they saw the aim of the project as the collection of neat visual representations of concepts. Success in the activity was equated by some with a lack of ambiguity, that is, the aim was to take photographs that could be seen by others and immediately associated with the 'correct' concept. The following comments show the various verbs that students use to describe this idea of a singular and unambiguous representation through photography e.g. 'shows', 'captures', 'means', 'fits', 'idea behind', 'message', 'where it falls', 'perfect example' and so on:

I thought it was quite a good picture, and it kind of shows like unity, everyone together, so it's like acceptance of everybody (B)

...the gender ones, I think they were quite easy to do. And then when you were able to look at them, you were able to them, um, where it would fall and why it would fall like that (F)

Well we both just said, 'That captures feminism. We'll take that' yeah (D)

I think as soon as you look at it you know it's 'trans' straight away, it's a bit of an obvious one (I)

The students apply a traditional semiotic approach to representation, in which there is the signified (the concept) and the signifier (the visual representation of the concept). One student says of a photograph: 'Just to me, it's diversity' (I). In this statement, the photograph is treated as an uncomplicated signifier despite the endless complexities

that surround each photograph (van Leeuwen, 2005; Kind, 2013). Sometimes discussion could open up this simplistic understanding of representation, but for some students, others' questioning and attempts to develop discussion around an image would be construed as others simply misunderstanding and not getting 'the point'.

Maybe I need to be a bit more clear when I take a picture (laughing) (F)

When the photographs were seen as visual representations of particular concepts and not up for discussion, their part in the learning process was severely limited. They became – at most – memory aids, triggering simplistic definitions of concepts to be trotted out in examination conditions. These photographs consolidated, perhaps even crystalized, understanding. The following comments all relate to this sense of limitation:

I think definitely with like capitalism, I did that photo and that definitely helped me understand it more, like that image in my head I'll remember (G)

I think it gave me a basic understanding of what it is... I think you can get the basics through it but maybe like not the in-depth like questioning of what you need to know (F)

It didn't change my understanding, it just made it clearer, but it hasn't changed it (I)

As Kind (2013) describes in her explorations with children around photography, the camera has played a historical role in regulation, control and capture. Photography is historically and culturally connected to our desire to want to control the world around us, and has played a part in the striation of space, peoples, species and so on. In this project, the students saw their actions as 'capturing' concepts and in doing so, they worked to reinforce common sense understandings of these concepts, closing them down to much needed interrogation. For example, diversity became something easy to see, easy to classify and unproblematic. For participant B, diversity was 'done' through a photograph of students queueing in a campus café.

We just took a picture in the quad of like everyone because [university name] is quite diverse anyways so I kind of understand that anyway yeah...I took it of people because I thought with the different colours as well it represents like

different people I guess... I thought it was quite a good picture, and it kind of shows like unity, everyone together, so it's like acceptance of everybody (B)

B assumes that a group of ethnically diverse individuals is a good (simple, singular) representation of diversity. She goes on to discuss, in relation to the same photograph, concepts of unity and togetherness, without disentangling these various concepts or trying to determine how they might relate to one another, and how these relationships may be different depending on the theoretical perspective you adopt. The same photograph could of course become a starting point for further questions rather than an endpoint for the task, highlighting the essential role of discussion around the images.

Class discussion versus online discussion

Students were positive about the class discussions that would flow from looking at the photographs together during seminars. As mentioned above, for most of the interviewees, it was the discussions rather than the photo-taking that was the important part of the project in terms of a positive impact on their learning.

I think it is good and I think what I like is like when we had the big... when we go through the photos and we all discuss it, because it goes into depth (D)

Hearing ideas reiterated by different individuals and related to different images built a kind of 'collective definition' among students – a shared glossary that individuals could dip into for their own conceptual vocabulary and explanations.

For most of the students, it was important to hear different perspectives on the same image. Coming into contact with different connotations that emerge from the same image was a fundamental experience in their learning. Other students might point out things that were not visible to another student; these moments led to strong affective responses, described by the students as transformational moments in the learning process. Student C, for example, was struck by the realisation that Big Ben is a male personification of a building, and contributes to a 'male-ness' in Westminster, the seat of power in the UK:

I was quite shocked when we discussed it in the class because I never thought of Big Ben as a male name and I was told that, well they've said to me how it's

called Big Ben and how it's masculine and stuff, so it was quite interesting to me (C)

Through engaging with others' perspectives on the same photograph, there was the potential for an individual student to have a more open mind when looking at other photographs, or even when looking at objects in the world more generally.

Well, this photo, it made me think about many things (C)

But now like there are so many things you can say about a dress couldn't you (D)

In sharp contrast to the fruitful face to face discussions provoked by the images, there was next to no discussion in the online environment of Instagram. Students 'liked' photographs made by other students in the class, perhaps to show that they recognised the effort made, but they did not engage in commenting in any consistent or extensive way. There were other social spaces though that played a role in the dialogues around the photographs that we had not anticipated or built into the learning design. These included WhatsApp groups between students who were friends studying the same module. These dialogues seemed to play a role in boosting the confidence of the students when it came to posting photographs on Instagram. But they could also act as forums where students checked with each other that they had got it 'right', that the photograph and the hashtag matched up 'correctly'. This was potentially quite stifling of the dialogues around photographs, reinforcing the idea of singular representation and the 'fit' of concepts to images.

I shared it in my WhatsApp group to ask if it was the right thing like...we just throw things in there that we don't understand then help each other with it... I just asked whether it was the right thing or not, like, or whether I was missing the point (H)

I uploaded it and then I showed some of my friends, like the first one I've taken, this is what I've done. And they were like okay, I'll do something like that (G)

Discussion

The main findings from this project were that while some students experienced the project – and particularly, the use of Instagram, as a traversal of the divide between academic learning and personal life, others were unfamiliar with Instagram and experienced it as ‘one more thing to learn’. Despite this, the project unsettled typical affective dimensions of formal university learning through the movement across different spaces encouraged by the image-taking. Through the project, students made connections between everyday life and abstract concepts and enhanced ‘depth’ in their learning where we understand depth to be a sense of connectedness. On the other hand, students were often hindered in engaging with photography as a way to advance critical understanding of concepts because of the perceived need to ‘capture’ concepts through neat, singular visual representations. Face to face discussions were essential for building depth and criticality in understanding; in contrast, the online environment of Instagram was not used in an in-depth way and Whatsapp was used among friendship groups to ‘check’ the photographs of one another.

We need to explore those aspects of the learning design that appeared to hinder liberatory theorizing as explained by hooks (2003, 2014). In particular, the conceptualisation of the task as ‘capturing’ unambiguous representations through photography worked against an approach of critically questioning the social world and relevant sociological concepts. Although the project encouraged students to make connections between everyday experiences and theory, the process gave priority to the theory. The emphasis on predetermined syllabi in contemporary university teaching requires critical pedagogues to first determine those theoretical concepts they wish to introduce to learners, and then hope that the students find relevant applications in their everyday lives. If though, as hooks suggests, theory is to be a liberatory force in our lives rather than an imperialistic imposition on everyday experiences, it needs to start with an instinctive desire to make sense of what disturbs and upsets us. What if this had been the starting point for the students – responding first and foremost to the affective dimensions of their everyday experience? What if they had used photography to explore, document and penetrate the situations, moments and contexts in their lives that they had found troubling, regardless of whether they could explain what was troubling about it? How would such a project occur in the space of the university, constrained as we are by the requirement to

produce module handbooks, assignment guidelines and validated syllabi and reading lists well in advance of meeting our students?

The findings also suggest that we need more time in a project like this to reflect with students on the process of taking photographs. The notion that the photographs were attempts to 'capture' a concept in a singular, unquestionable way, was a hindrance in relation to the module aims of problematizing core concepts. Class discussion was a vital part of opening up the ambiguities and complexities of photographic representation, demonstrating how essential it is that mobile photography learning projects are brought back to class discussion time (Pimmer et al., 2016). In the future, class discussion could also be used as a space of collaborative reflection on the process of taking photographs itself. Part of expanding students' critical multimodal literacies might be to encourage them to develop a more nuanced understanding of the visual mode, engaging with the multiplicity of connotations and connections that each image generates, and perhaps even thinking beyond the possibilities of 'representation' and 'capture'(Kind, 2013).

It is essential that we recognise the limitations of the project presented in this paper. The paper explores the experiences of a single cohort in a very specific context – one course, one university, one location, one set of lecturers and so on. Generalising from the findings requires sensitivity to context. However, the paper offers some ideas about how a project like this might unfold in the context of students' learning experiences and some of the parameters that shape their experiences of taking and sharing photographs. It is hoped that this will be helpful to others thinking about and working with the potentials of photography, social media and/or mobile learning in learning experiences.

Conclusion

Drawing on bell hooks' concept of 'liberatory theorizing', I have discussed students' responses to a project that involved them taking and sharing photographs via Instagram as part of their learning on a sociology module underpinned by a critical pedagogy approach. The findings show that the situated learning experiences in the project offered students an opportunity to connect the abstract with the everyday, but that they were hindered in their criticality by the conceptualisation of the task as

'capturing' unambiguous representations of concepts. Class discussion was vital in encouraging students to explore alternative concepts and problematize their knowledge and experiences, whereas forums for online discussion around the images were not taken up by the students. This article highlights the importance of in-depth dialogue as part of critical pedagogy projects that make use of digital mobile platforms – particularly image-based social media – as a way to encourage and enhance liberatory theorizing. Discussions around the images are central, but also helpful might be opening up discussions with students about the nature of photography, visual representation and the potentials of photography when we go beyond representation.

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