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TEACHING AND LEARNING

Doing world politics and social media: Digital practice and open education in international relations

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Abstract

This paper sets out the need for, and potential offered by, introducing social media into teaching global challenges. We argue that teaching on global challenges should involve teaching with, through, and about social media as a place of politics. This paper suggests that using social media in our teaching can help to equip students with critical digital literacies as a set of skills for engaging, understanding, and analysing digital materials. We also argue that digital spaces can offer real potential to open dialogue and thought on global challenges in our classrooms. The article presents reflections from our own classroom experiences to think through how social media offers the potential to re-work hierarchies and unpack knowledges of world politics that are taken for granted. In doing so, we are engaged with wider academic discussions on how digital pedagogies are connected to and can enact critical pedagogies. Finally, the article sets out a research agenda that can take this forward to better understand how students learn through social media and how we can best incorporate this into our teaching as a discipline.

Keywords: social media; global challenges; digital literacies; open pedagogy; critical pedagogy

Introduction

Social media is inseparable from the global challenges we face; it is a space in which these challenges are experienced, shared, resisted, understood, and negotiated. This paper argues that teaching on global challenges should involve teaching with, through, and about social media as a place of politics. We suggest this is important because: (1) world politics is increasingly taking place online, and degrees that best equip students need to recognise social media as a site/sight of the international; (2) students already learn, experience, and discuss political opinion online and it is already a space of (informal) learning that needs to be taken seriously in our classrooms; (3) social media offers an opportunity to create open and critical pedagogies and therefore to rework classroom hierarchies and realise student-centred learning; (4) equally, social media can also be a space where hierarchies are reinforced and viewpoints are narrowed. Therefore, we argue that social media is not only important to a full understanding of global challenges, but it also offers particular pedagogic opportunities for critical pedagogues (who must also take seriously the ways in which social media can run counter to critical pursuits). This paper locates this argument in a strong theoretical foundation in critical digital pedagogy, enriched by reflective narratives from four educators (Teachers A–D) detailing their classroom experiences. It argues for the integration of social media not only as content but as a pedagogical tool, challenging traditional

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boundaries of teaching and learning. We advocate for student partnership and call for further research into developing digital literacies that are inclusive, participatory, and critically engaged. They push back against the argument that social media content is frivolous, inauthentic, disjointed, or distracting.

First, this paper sets out the potential offered by introducing social media into teaching global challenges. We show how students increasingly encounter and interact with the political online. We then build on the recent research of Le Bourdon (2024) to argue that social media is a space of learning that is at its most powerful when it bridges world politics with lived experiences, cutting through mainstream knowledge sources to provide authentic accounts of the tangible effects of 'high' politics. We then suggest that work on critical digital literacies and open digital pedagogies demonstrates the potential that digital spaces can offer for critically engaged educators to open dialogue and thought. Here we are arguing for the cultivation of critical digital literacies as a set of skills for engaging, understanding, and analysing digital materials. Following on from Hurson (2020, unpaginated), citing Watters (2015), ' . . . when we talk about "open" pedagogy, we are interrogating how interactions, resources, and digital tools can "actually transform the way in which we do 'school' [and] the way in which we teach and learn" (Watters 2015).

This pushes back on the dismissal of social media as frivolous or distracting, to see how it is imbricated in world politics and students' learning in ways that need to be more fully accounted for. The paper then brings in reflections from our own classroom experiences to think through how social media offers the potential to re-work hierarchies and unpack taken-for-granted knowledges of world politics. In doing so, we are engaged with wider academic discussions on how digital pedagogies are connected to and can enact critical pedagogies (Hurson 2020). Finally, we set out a research agenda that can take this forward to better understand how students learn through social media and how we can best incorporate this into our teaching as a discipline.

Teaching world politics and social media

Social media is key to global politics. Social media became a key place where Ukrainian civilians and government documented and communicated what was happening during the Russian invasion in 2022, and well before that, helped shore up notions of Ukrainian national identity in the face of Russian irredentism (Boichak and Jackson 2020). During the invasion, social media companies themselves left the Russian market and denied access to their sites from Russian IP addresses. Social media played a role in the civil reaction to the police killing of George Floyd in the US, and viral reactions such as #blackouttuesday (where people posted back squares on Instagram) came to be a place of politics and activism. Meanwhile, Chinese company Bytedance-owned Tiktok continues to be under scrutiny in the US for data privacy concerns, as part of wider international tensions. X, formerly Twitter, has made changes to its algorithm to try to stop the spread of climate change misinformation on the platform. Trump has been banned from X, then allowed to return, whilst other populist leaders have taken to TikTok to reach a younger audience.

Social media is thus inseparable from global challenges such as climate change, racial injustice, international relations, and the international political economy. Therefore, we cannot fully understand global challenges without understanding not only how they are represented online, but also how they are forged, challenged, and enacted digitally. Social media expands (and challenges) the boundaries of global politics; it connects people across geographies and cultures, and plays a key role in shaping how global issues are understood and acted upon in multiple, diverse, and ambiguous ways. We use the languages of global challenges deliberately to move out of more rigid disciplinary structures to speak to those who teach on courses in International Relations, International Development, Sociology, Environment, Geography, and a plethora of other subjects that seek to educate students on the key issues we face.

Already there is a burgeoning scholarship that researches sites/sights of global challenges and world politics online. This includes work on government and political parties' use of social media

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(Kalsnes, 2016), security actors' use of social media (eg Crilley and Pears 2021; Jester 2023), digital diplomacy (eg Manor, 2016), social activism online (eg Murthy, 2018; Le Bourdon 2024), social media and the international political economy (eg Fuchs 2013), social media and climate change misinformation (Treen, Williams and O'Neill 2020), and social media and political revolution (eg Comunello and Anzera 2012). This sits alongside literature from media and culture studies that explores social media itself and, in so doing, exposes the ways that it perpetuates and/or challenges wider structural inequalities such as racism, sexism, and ableism (eg Litchfield et al. 2018; Heung et al. 2022).

At a minimum, social media needs to enter our syllabus when we teach global challenges because we cannot fully understand these challenges and their impact on our lives and politics without attention to social media. Indeed, it has, in formal ways e.g. course titles, in modules, or more commonly woven into course material, lecture content, and seminar activities. It also contributes to student learning in less formal ways, as world events dominate social media news feeds, online influencers share their politics online, and political hashtags go viral. What we suggest is that this increasing attention to social media can be improved through a more sustained engagement with thinking through its pedagogy, moving from its incorporation into the content of our modules, to thinking more about the skills that our students need to be equipped with, as well as the pedagogic approach to social media and its potential in the classroom. Put more bluntly, including tweets in lecture slides is great, but we can and must go so much further.

Students, learning, and social media

Research on the pedagogy of global challenges has identified the importance of everyday encounters, or informal learnings (Le Bourdon 2023). In an era of fake news, polarised mainstream media, and increased restrictions on formal education curricula, these spaces beyond structured learning are offering fruitful pedagogical sites. From the arts to community events, everyday conversations to connecting with the environment, everyday shared or independent learning opens powerful moments of learning, reflection, and reflexivity. Given that young people are only increasing their time on social media, we must work to understand the experiences and pedagogical potentials of these online spaces (Le Bourdon 2024).

It might seem banal to point out that students use social media. However, some figures help to illustrate the extent to which this is true. In the UK, 97 per cent of those in the 18- to 24-year-old demographic and 96 per cent of the 25 to 34-year-old age bracket use YouTube. The average time spent on social media per day is 2 hours and 24 minutes (Nyst 2023, unpaginated). For 'Gen Z' undergraduates (those aged 18–25 in 2019) who make up the majority of UK undergraduate students, 42 per cent first encounter the news through their smartphone, and 57 per cent of them look to messaging and social media platforms for their news content (Kalogeropoulos 2019, unpaginated). For that reason alone, it is essential that students are better equipped to critically reflect on this content. Many students also supplement their learning with online material, for example, making use of YouTube videos that unpack political theory. In that way, these students' education is already hybrid, but in ways that are outside the purview of the University (Mineshima-Lowe et al. 2023).

While online activism had been growing over the past two decades, we saw the dynamics and content of these spaces change during the Covid-19 lockdowns. From infographics on unpacking the history of Windrush, tweets providing accounts of inadequate social housing in the UK, to videos explaining the White privilege on TikTok, complex and nuanced global challenges were broken down into eight slides, ten tweets, and 30-second clips. On the one hand, we could see this as simplifying incredibly intricate and historical issues; on the other hand, we can see that pressing local and global injustices were reaching wider audiences than ever before.

There is considerable literature that shows how using social platforms in teaching can improve student outcomes. Its incorporation into teaching is shown to improve student satisfaction

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(Rahman, Ramakrishnan, and Ngamassi 2020), student engagement (Al-Bahrani, Patel, and Sheridan 2015), and emphasises the role it can play in improving communication, be that between educator and learner (Kim 2017), or peer-to-peer between learners (Mikum et al. 2018). This literature is often clustered around social media's use in online or virtual environments, or the way that particular platforms are used in teaching. Shifts to online and hybrid teaching have accelerated attention to the role online platforms and social media networks can take as teaching tools (see Jester 2020). What is less thoroughly examined in this literature is how social media content, as a pre-existing site of informal learning, can be brought into conversation with the subject matter that we teach in pedagogically productive ways.

We also need to recognise that social media is a space where students engage with politics and activism online, and more so where it connects with their lived experience (Le Bourdon 2024). Yet, at the same time that students engage with social media as a site to connect to activism and politics, there is a danger of a lack of critical engagement with the sources that they encounter. Although seven in 10 adults (69 per cent) said they were confident in identifying misinformation, only two in 10 (22 per cent) were able to correctly identify the tell-tale signs of a genuine post, without making mistakes. There was a similar pattern among older children aged 12–17 (74 per cent confident but only 11 able) (Ofcom 2022, unpaginated).

Unsurprisingly, then, literature also suggests an increased adoption of social media in university classrooms, whilst acknowledging a reticence from educators and students alike to use it, given its potential pitfalls and dangers. As Purvis, Rodger, and Beckingham (2020) found, this includes worries about the time it takes to stay up to date and worries about inclusivity and wider dangers of social media use. Here too, we hope to intervene to suggest that some of these concerns might also be the basis for a more fruitful interrogation of the pedagogic potentials of social media where, for example, instead of being afraid of misinformation, we acknowledge and explore with students the ways misinformation can work online. Or, in particular, how the need to feel expert in the content itself and to stick to traditional models of content delivery actually distract from the pedagogical potential of allowing learners to provide their own content for discussions. In this article, then, it is not that we are optimistically unaware, or dismissive of, the problems of social media content and its use, but instead we argue that those problems cannot be – and should not be – distinct from our teaching on global challenges but might in themselves offer potential for more fruitful discussion. There is both opportunity and threat in students' heavy use of social media. It provides them with a platform to link world politics to their lives, and to engage in the politics of global challenges in a way that is both meaningful and accessible. However, there is still a lack of formal education around navigating misinformation or thinking about this engagement critically.

Critical digital literacy

Our first contention is that we need to go beyond viewing social media merely as a means to develop student engagement, to an understanding of its place and value in students' lives, and harnessing this to equip them with the skills to critically analyse the content they are exposed to. Moreover, we see a need to empower teachers with a methodology to do this in classroom settings, enabling students to become 'more situated and adept digital citizens' (Talib 2018). Taken together, this shows how important it is that students are equipped with a digital literacy whereby we foster the skills to produce and interrogate digital multimedia texts (Ávila and Pandya 2013). This argument has been made by Ibrar Bhatt (eg 2012; 2020), who has covered extensively digital literacy and the 'epistemology of ignorance', aiming to draw this pedagogic literature across into the research and practice of world politics. Bhatt's work (including also Bhatt and MacKenzie 2019; MacKenzie and Bhatt 2020), aims to generate conversations about 'Lies, bullshit and fake news', asking how these are disentangled and how we might explore this in a higher education setting. Here, Bhatt and MacKenzie (2019) explicitly acknowledge that digital spaces are an

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important space epistemologically; this is of direct relevance to a wide range of global challenges, with climate change being one obvious example.

Returning to Le Bourdon's (2024) work, there is an opportunity to foster a critical engagement with world politics because of the bridging work that social media can do between the student, their lived experiences, and global challenges. Therefore, using social media in teaching and, in particular, asking students about their own experiences and knowledge of social media enables teaching to bring together the international and the everyday through students' own lived online experience. In that way, their own expertise in the digital becomes a building block for teaching. Thus, not only can a digital literacy be generated, so too can a critical digital literacy, creating a pedagogy that aims to instill critical literacies: '(1) disrupting the commonplace (2) interrogating multiple viewpoints (3) focusing on sociopolitical issues and (4) taking action and promoting social justice' (Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys 2002, 382), but that expands this into social media, so that students can engage in social media with an attention to its politics.

Open digital pedagogies: OK Boomer

Having established in the earlier section that students are spending huge amounts of time on social media, it is also important to note that they are likely to be more expert in a different range of social media platforms than their lecturers. And whilst academics are more likely to use data from X in their research and as examples, this is reflective of their own media usage rather than a fair reflection of the social media landscape. Put more pithily by a participant in research by Reuters (Newman et al. 2019, unpaginated): 'Facebook is ancient. Like, a mum's thing. I don't really use it anymore'. But, before you hang your Millennial/Boomer head in shame, we want to highlight this flip in expertise as a pedagogic opportunity. There is an expertise in social media use that you can work with and bring into conversation with more academic or scholarly debates that exist in the field.

On one hand this can be seen as a way to both render the strange familiar, i.e. to use the content students are used to navigating and expressing themselves through in order to approach more complex issues such as political theory, and offer opportunity to render the familiar strange; that is, to ask them to consider the racialised politics of Instagram influencers, for example. This builds on work on pedagogy and popular culture from within International Relations that stresses the pedagogic potential of teaching world politics through popular culture (see Holland 2011; Clapton and Shepherd 2017; Jester 2020). More than this, there is also potential to produce social media content as part of the learning process or output. Therefore, teaching with and through social media presents a unique opportunity to operationalise open digital teaching methods. Rosen and Smale (2015) show the potential of open digital pedagogy, using freely available online platforms and tools to create open learning spaces where students actively participate in their education. As they detail, this approach is about recognising students as co-creators, who can use open systems and work to flatten some hierarchies (Rosen and Smale 2015).

Critical digital dialogue

Furthermore, work with social media in a classroom can be a way to enable 'critical digital dialogue', which in Hilton's (2013, 602) words is dialogue 'that actively engages learners in an educative process meant to uncover hidden socio-historical dynamics and inspire transformative possibilities in a digitally connected future'. This builds on the work of Freire (1972), where the classroom is viewed not simply as a place of instruction but rather a space of exchange. Therefore, this means taking a:

> problem-posing focus – one that connects course content to the real-world struggles of students – helps to highlight and challenge hidden cultural and historical societal dynamics

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> that create imbalances of power (Edwards, 2010; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2007), ultimately, providing . . . new ways for students to claim authority for their own experience (Hilton 2013, 603).

In Hilton's work, he thinks through how online learning platforms can enable critical digital dialogues to take place, emphasising the need to build human-centred online spaces, introduce a diversity of texts, and be explicit about power structures.

We draw on Hilton's approach but think about the possibilities of fostering digital critical literacies beyond online platforms and expanding it to think about a pedagogy of social media in the higher education classroom on global challenges. Social media can help to realise critical pedagogic goals, starting from the problems of world politics through direct connection with students' lived experiences. Centring their own knowledges can empower them and enable recognition of non-standard or non-academic knowledges and experiences, giving them the ability to reflect on the knowledge they are exposed to and accumulating through social media consumption. Encouraging them to link their social media use to wider global challenges and social structures of power (and indeed do the reverse) can allow us to meet our own pedagogic goals in the classroom whilst engaging students.

Reflections from the classroom

To ground these discussions in our own experiences as educators, we each set out to reflect on our own classroom experiences with teaching with, on, or through social media. In particular, we wanted to think through what challenges teachers might experience with trying to enact and foster the critical digital literacy and dialogue we have advocated for above.

Teacher A's reflections

In my experience, there are a variety of concerns relating to the use of social media within teaching. Firstly – before we get to student views – is that not everyone has equal access to digital spaces. Some students may only be accessing social media where Wi-Fi is freely available, whilst others may have older phones that make their experience different from that of their peers. Selwyn (2010) refers to this as digital inequality, and this has only widened since the Covid-19 pandemic, when online spaces have become more important practically and politically. A small but vocal minority also tells me that they are retreating from social media platforms, which is an interesting and perhaps surprising development. It is important to understand, therefore, that not all experiences or views will be the same. That said, there are a range of commonalities that have become evident over my years of classroom social media use.

The use of non-traditional material in the classroom can level the playing field, but this takes some careful navigation. I have written about this more widely with respect to using pop culture to teach political theory (where the power disparity is, arguably, greatest, with students seemingly most afraid of theory-related subjects). Students appreciate the way in which the use of classroom social media allows them an ontological power – as a result of its familiarity – that teaching without denies them. I often find that students can initially be embarrassed about this: they are not often keen to admit that they get their understanding of the Russian war in Ukraine from TikTok. These social media representations are political and shape how we understand the conflict, for example, in a gendered way (Desoutter 2025). It takes care for me to create an environment in which students are comfortable revealing that they obtain their information from TikTok, and an approach that the classroom is a space for us all to learn together.

Once students become more comfortable sharing with me and others the way they experience the world, we can begin to unpack key global issues together. Perhaps my favourite discussions each year centre around the issue of so-called 'fake news' and 'post-truthism'. There is a large and

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growing pedagogy on teaching this subject, including with reference to politics specifically. Zembylas (2025: 2–3) for example discusses Hannah Arendt's concept of world alientation: 'the estrangement of individuals from the shared, public world due to the rise of mass society, the dominance of social and economic concerns, and the collapse of boundaries between the private and public realms'. As they note, this is especially relevant in a 'post-truth' context where people feel always interconnected but only engaged at a surface level. The literature does not yet offer significant discussions of post-truthism and teaching in a social media context, however. In class, we discuss the role of social media in spreading 'post-truthism' and I am always fascinated by students' views. There is a real appetite to understand social media as a structural form, i.e. not just something that individuals engage with. They are also keen to think about solutions to issues like this, but this can prove more challenging in the classroom as this requires wider knowledge (in this case, of policy). This underscores the need to continue to teach subject-specific knowledge alongside that relating to social media. There is also a desire to approach the issue of fake news from an education perspective, with students typically rejecting strongly the idea that this should be formally regulated.

Methodologically speaking, the use of social media materials in the classroom can also encourage students to think more widely about their dissertation topics. In recent years, I have (as I imagine others have, too) seen a spike in the number of students wanting to undertake projects using digital data, including social media (for general context, see Jester 2020). This attracts a range of ideas, from the use of far-right fora to analyses of the use of social media platforms to spread racist abuse. I think this can sometimes test our pedagogic skills. If we are not familiar with the platforms students want to examine, it can be harder to supervise their projects, especially from an ethical perspective. Because social media is such a key part of people's everyday lives, I think there is a tendency amongst both students and researchers to assume that this data is 'public' and fair game. It is firstly more complex than this but also, secondly, is a space that could open the students themselves to risk. Both of these things demand further pedagogic reflection.

Teacher B's reflections

Students want to know how to use critical analysis for digital literacy. This can be an exchange with their knowledge of digital literacy. Research in both high schools and universities has shown that students are incredibly skeptical about learning through social media (Mineshima-Lowe et al. 2023; Le Bourdon 2024). They worry about believing or spreading misinformation, the backlash they may get from sharing or not sharing posts, and the extreme content that algorithms often throw up. This means students already practice much caution when encountering global challenges online. Yet, the research on this also shows that what they see online is having an effect on their behaviour offline. Students spoke of doing further research and having conversations in their own communities as a result of what they had come across through social media. With this in mind, as educators, I would advocate for two key things: (1) creating space for reflecting about global challenges on social media; and (2) supporting students with the critical skills to navigate such content.

The first point speaks to the fact that we cannot deny that students are increasingly turning to the likes of YouTube or TikTok to find summarised versions of our course content. Nor should we dismiss the fact that so much of their immediate understanding of current affairs comes from social media. Thus, we must acknowledge this in our classrooms and allow students the time to reflect and discuss what they have seen online. This is not to say this should replace academic texts or course content, but we also should not shame students for engaging with topics through these means. Creating a chance to reflect also allows us to connect what they are seeing in their everyday lives with the core scholarly debates we are pushing on them. If we bring their experiences into the classroom, we offer an opportunity to critically reflect and challenge both the content they bring and the academic debates we put on a pedestal.

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Secondly, as we see a trend in core 'critical skills' modules across programmes to support students from the transition between secondary and tertiary education, we must begin to include skills that enable students to navigate global challenges online. Students are telling us that they are turning to the likes of TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, and as the power in these platforms only increases, this move to supplement through online spaces will also rise. We must adapt our pedagogical practices to meet students where they are and provide them with the support and guidance to help them with their anxieties in navigating these spaces.

Teacher C's reflections

My key takeaway from introducing social media into the International Relations classroom is its dual potential: it can both empower students and reveal the politics embedded in everyday digital content. When students are invited to bring their own examples from platforms they use, often unfamiliar to me, they confidently connect these to themes of identity, power, and global politics in ways that traditional teaching can struggle to surface. This not only disrupts the usual classroom hierarchy, where the teacher is the sole source of knowledge, but also validates students' lived digital experiences as legitimate starting points for critical inquiry.

I most fully experienced the disruptive potential of teaching through social media in a seminar I delivered as part of Political Futures, an outreach programme open to final-year students who have an interest in studying Politics, International Development, and International Relations at university. In the seminar, students are supposed to be given an impression of what it might be like to study international politics at the undergraduate level. After a short lecture on terrorism and media, students worked in groups to link social media/pop culture examples to world politics. Their choices (including Nigel Farage's TikTok presence, the meme-ification of the Will Smith/Chris Rock incident, and debates around Billie Eilish and queerbaiting) led to rich discussions about populism, media bias, and identity politics online. These examples, drawn entirely from students, demonstrated not only their digital fluency but also their capacity to critically engage with political content they encounter online. This exercise evidenced to me the potential of offering the chance for students to lead discussions from their own lived digital everyday. Student feedback from the session included:

> I think today's session is super fun, and there's less history content than I thought. Love how everything is actually connected to politics at the end.

> Today's session definitely made me even more interested to learn more about politics and international relations as I am now able to apply politics to several other aspects of society in a way in which I couldn't do before.

These quotes speak to how the topic was engaging, but how it also changed preconceived ideas of what 'politics' might be. I also found that students were confident to talk and present as they were often detailing a topic or example on which they felt expert, even though it was their first time in a higher education classroom. My interest, borne of my work in popular culture, comes not only from the explicit invocation of politics in social media but also the implicit politics of the seemingly trivial and banal, and in this session it was interesting how quickly students were able to reflect upon the politics of their social media feeds when invited to do so. Working with social media shows that social media is not apolitical, even seemingly trivial content carries political weight. As educators, we must help students feel confident using and analysing these platforms, while guiding them to see how power operates within and through them.

Other scholars have demonstrated the value of using popular culture in teaching, for example, Clapton and Shepherd (2017) on *Game of Thrones*, and Holland (2011) on *The West Wing*. Jester (2021) highlights how popular culture can foster critical learning by prompting students to

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question their assumptions. Similarly, social media can serve these same purposes: it offers familiar, real-time content that resonates with students' lived experiences, while also inviting them to critically interrogate the political and cultural narratives they encounter online. Both approaches support 'knowledge cultivation' rather than mere accumulation (Kamola 2025), encouraging students to revisit and challenge what they think they know about world politics.

This reflection, then, draws attention to how social media can function when you use it with students. It can allow us as teachers to meet students where they are at, starting with their own political/social/cultural knowledge and building outwards (or reflecting inwards). It can thus create greater confidence for students in a classroom. At the same time, it can make visible power and politics in spaces that are previously considered 'un' or 'a' political. It, like popular culture, can make the strange familiar and the familiar strange. It is also freeing to know that the session worked better when I asked the students to bring examples of content. It is not only okay that I am not up to date on the latest Snapchat trends, TikTok videos, or Reddit feeds, but that it has pedagogic value to invite the students to bring their own knowledge. Ultimately, this means students can begin conversations about global politics that are directly connected to the content they encounter online, whilst also being guided to recognise that social media itself is a political space, shaped by power, representation, and ideology.

Teacher D's reflections

My experience of bringing social media into the classroom has largely been limited to using it for illustrative purposes and to animate the topics I am teaching, particularly through the use of popular culture references I personally encounter through my own use of social media. This point about personal encounter is, of course, salient in the context of some of the reflections earlier in this piece on the (sometimes profound) differences in use of social media between generations (and often within generations). Quite simply, the cultural moments I might draw on to illustrate topics, or that I think encapsulate something about international relations (and global health politics more specifically, the area I work in) may not – and often don't – register with students in the way I would expect. As my colleague pointed out on viewing some of my lecture slides once, a gif-reference to an early 2000s music video is unlikely to bring about any recognising nods from students born around the same time.

This is not just a facile point about the out-of-touch lecturer (in denial that they are out of touch), but also raises, I think, some important ethical and pedagogical issues to consider. The use of these pop culture references is often intended to be light-hearted (though they of course also can illustrate negative societal norms and the ways certain issues and people are represented) and to bring levity into often heavy discussions about world politics and global challenges. There are important questions to ask ourselves about the extent to which that levity is appropriate, as well as the assumptions we are making about our students and their lived experiences, the cultural moments they can relate to and the ones they cannot, and particularly ones that might have affected them personally. This was particularly acute during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, given there was a high chance that students were personally affected by illness, bereavement, or the pandemic's other socioeconomic consequences.

All that said, I have also found that using these popular culture references in circulation on social media holds substantial pedagogical value. First, their intended purpose is, of course, to provide relatable illustrations or pithy encapsulations of difficult concepts, and I think they can absolutely be a tool for this purpose. Second, they can create a shared vocabulary to discuss these difficult concepts. Third, they can help flatten the hierarchy in the classroom just a little (to the extent this is possible) by recognising and valuing student knowledge and their contributions. Fourth, collective joy and levity can make the classroom feel like a safe(r) environment and space, where students feel more comfortable with teachers and with each other. Finally, it can also be a useful crutch for the teacher and help alleviate some of the anxieties that can sometimes come with

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teaching. The trick, of course, is being self-reflexive about their use and cognisant that popular culture is shot through with hierarchies that we risk replicating.

How to teach social media and global challenges

While our reflections demonstrate the pedagogic potential of social media, we recognise that it is not enough to show that social media has pedagogical potential; it must be used strategically, not just incidentally, to support meaningful learning that works with the learning outcomes for an intended course or module. While this paper highlights how social media can empower students and foster critical engagement with global challenges, we acknowledge that clear guidelines or frameworks for its purposeful integration still need to be developed. We have suggested that as a first step, we should recognise the importance of social media, make space for students to bring content in, and thus open space for critical dialogue. But this isn't yet a pedagogic model; instead, we argue that future research should focus on co-developing these frameworks with students, ensuring they reflect diverse digital experiences and align with critical pedagogical goals. This collaborative approach would help educators move beyond ad hoc use, enabling social media to serve intentional instructional purposes and support the cultivation of critical, reflective learning environments.

We suggest a research agenda and potential pedagogic approach that might help develop an understanding of how best to incorporate social media into our curricula. More work needs to be done with students as partners to consider how we can successfully incorporate critical digital literacies into our classrooms. This can be through research projects, but can also be done in the classroom, allowing students to take the lead in social media activities. Crucially, we suggest that this research needs to centre the student voice and experience to make real our commitments to critical digital pedagogy. This means working with students to understand how they learn, whilst also working with the subject benchmarks and key competencies of our disciplines. We have established why it is imperative (and potentially joyful!) to teach global challenges and social media together, and we suggest more research is needed to answer questions around how we can teach with and through social media in a way that can broaden and potentially disrupt our accepted knowledge of global challenges and also disrupt some of the problematic hierarchies in the classroom. The intention in this piece is to encourage teachers in higher education to begin from the place that interactions with social media in the classroom can be pedagogically productive.

Conclusion

We offered reflections from our experiences using social media in classrooms, aware of the power and potential of social media in teaching global challenges. This paper has made the argument that social media offers potential for teaching global challenges. Each educator's reflection highlights a distinct pedagogical insight into the use of social media in teaching global challenges. Teacher A emphasises the need to navigate digital inequalities and ethical risks, while recognising social media's potential to enhance engagement and critical thinking. Teacher B underscores students' desire for critical digital literacy, advocating for safe spaces to reflect and tools to navigate misinformation and online content on global challenges. Teacher C shows how social media can disrupt traditional classroom hierarchies, empowering students to lead discussions and connect personal digital experiences to global politics. The final reflection from Teacher D explores the generational and cultural gaps in using pop culture references, while affirming their value in creating shared understanding, levity, and a more inclusive classroom environment, but cautions that we remain reflexive and sensitive to student experiences.

In sum, we are suggesting that introducing social media to the classroom can help to meet the learning outcomes of a critical pedagogue teaching on global challenges and world politics. It helps

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in developing critical digital literacy, fostering engagement and relevance, connecting academic theory to students' lived digital experiences and current affairs, enhancing intercultural awareness and critical thinking, inviting student-led discussions and examples, promoting student agency, confidence, and collaborative learning, while disrupting traditional hierarchies and creating more inclusive, dialogic learning environments. Inviting social media into our classrooms can encourage students to reflect on the politics of information, identity, and power in digital spaces, and so recognise them as a site of politics. As such, this paper intends to provoke greater reflections on the role of social media in a global challenges classroom as a route to lessen hierarchies, empower students to draw from their own experiences, and, as such, to strengthen a curriculum on global challenges not only in terms of content but also in terms of teaching methods.

This paper has stressed the role that social media can play in teaching global challenges and to provoke engagement, emphasising that educators should do four things:

(1) Continue to draw on pedagogic literature on digital pedagogy to explore what it is to learn about and critically assess 'digital' international relations;
(2) Equip students to critically interrogate the form, content, and platforms through which world politics is now often conducted, experienced, understood, shared, and liked;
(3) Recognise the opportunity created through social media to flatten hierarchies in the classroom and enable critical digital literacies and pedagogies, and so realise the full potential of social media to help students critically engage in learning about global challenges in our classrooms; and
(4) Adapt curricula to incorporate the impacts of the digital in how we come to know and experience world politics in partnership with our students.

We argue that not only is there a need to teach global challenges and social media use together, given their entanglement in world politics and student lives, but that there is an opportunity to create more critical and open classrooms if this is done effectively and collaboratively.

Data availability statement. *Authors using original data – not shareable data.* The reflections in this piece are personal reflections based on auto-ethnographic data, as such this is about our own experiences in classrooms and not a shareable data set in traditional terms.

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