

Teaching as Sharing: Hashtag Activism and Information and Media Literacy

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Looking at recent examples of hashtag activism as collaborative storytelling practices and digital political communication, this article argues that sharing – in the sense of collectively held beliefs and grievances and their potential for creating narrative and social movements on social media – can be seen as operating on an educational level as well. Drawing on Ruth Page’s concept of the shared story and an analysis of the #MeToo movement, the article positions hashtag activism as a case study for sharing ideas, experiences, and skills, and the acquisition of information and media literacy. By extension, the paper provides an example of adopting an interdisciplinary approach in higher education that aims at enabling future teachers to retell, adapt, and remix stories and skills for their work in the EFL classroom.¹

Der Artikel argumentiert anhand aktueller Beispiele für Hashtag-Aktivismus als kollaborative Erzählpraktiken und digitale politische Kommunikation, dass das Teilen – im Sinne kollektiver Überzeugungen und Missstände sowie deren Potenzial zur Schaffung narrativer und sozialer Bewegungen in sozialen Netzwerken – auch auf der Ebene von Bildung operiert. Ausgehend von Ruth Pages Konzept der Shared Story und einer Analyse der #MeToo-Bewegung positioniert dieser Artikel Hashtag-Aktivismus als Fallstudie für den Austausch von Ideen, Erfahrungen und Fähigkeiten sowie den Erwerb von Information and Media Literacy. Infolgedessen stellt der Artikel ein Beispiel für den Einsatz eines interdisziplinären Ansatzes in der Hochschulbildung vor, der es zukünftigen Lehrpersonen ermöglichen soll, Geschichten und Inhalte sowie Kompetenzen im Englischunterricht einzusetzen, situationsangemessen anzupassen und neu zusammenzusetzen.

Media Activism and Social Participation

“Media activism can be defined as two related kinds of activity. One creates media that challenge the dominant culture, structure, or ruling class of

a society. The other advocates changes within that society intended to preserve or open up space for such media. Often media activism encompasses both these activities in the same historical moment; or it quickly moves between the two modes of action.” (Lasar, 2007, p. 925)

Terms such as alternative facts, deep fakes, and post-truth politics change our perception of and relationship to culture, structure, and class, which are contingent on the centrality of media in political discourse and characterized by the mediatization of real-life politics. This connection at the same time makes clear that citizenship, more than ever, requires a set of skills specifically dedicated to understanding and conceptualizing as well as reflecting on and engaging with various kinds of media. Matthew Lasar’s remarks on media activism emphasize that because the media themselves – and with them questions ranging from reliability and trustworthiness to freedom of speech and plurality – are at stake; the skills we need to navigate a mediatized world also become entwined with the political. In his work on convergence culture, Henry Jenkins (2006) reminds us that this development requires and fosters a democratization that sees media consumers assume the role of producers. The possibility for such bottom-up processes to effect media change can facilitate participation in society as well.

Recent moments on social media illustrate this potential (striving for) democratization: #OscarsSoWhite serves as an example of the numerous contestations of biases in the media industry that keep surfacing every year during awards season. Often paired with #OscarsSoStraight and #OscarsSoMale, the phrase becomes a banner under which social media users give voice to their dissatisfaction, anger, and disappointment regarding the Oscars that indeed tend to privilege White, heterosexual, cisgender men over a more diverse representation of the movie landscape, its producers, talent, and viewers. The idea of using

media to open up media for more inclusivity thereby also concerns larger systems of oppression and discrimination in society because media do not operate independently from cultural hegemony. As such, these movements that initially appeared as limited to the film industry translate into symptoms of the devastating realities that led to the formation of global activist movements such as #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo. As we will see in the following, both are examples of hashtag activism, which can be defined as the accumulation of voices online, the formation of discourse around a hashtag, that derive from shared grievances and come together in an activist effort.

This article argues that the skills connected to engaging in this form of online communication become a matter of political education. Information and media literacy (IML), as a provisional label for these skills, is therefore concerned with medial as well as social participation; it prefigures qualities of responsible citizenship that are becoming increasingly more pronounced in the digital age and because of the growing political polarization in the United States and other countries. While one needs to be information-and-media-literate in order to make sense of movements like #MeToo, we suggest that hashtag activism can teach us about IML because understanding its idiosyncrasies requires skills from fields as diverse as linguistics, media and communication, cultural studies, and political

science. In this sense, IML is provisional to the extent that its demarcations are malleable and allow for the integration of various perspectives in an interdisciplinary approach.

Adopting Ruth Page’s notion of the shared story, in the following we focus on the aspects of “telling” and “sharing” as a way of co-constructing narratives online. In *Narratives Online* (2018), Page defines the shared story as “a retelling, produced by many tellers, across iterative textual segments, which promotes shared attitudes between its tellers” (p. 18). Building on this framework, we place emphasis on the beliefs shared through such stories that create what Benedict Anderson (2006) calls imagined communities in the digital sphere and make hashtag activism a collaborative project. An exemplary analysis of the #MeToo movement will show that telling, sharing, and community building manifest themselves linguistically and perform cultural functions. The co-occurrence of #MeToo and other hashtags like #BlackLives-Matter emphasizes how grievances can be shared within and among minorities and how hashtag activism can provide a forum for expressing solidarity. Yet, since both movements are concerned with bodily integrity and the boundaries of personhood, their relation to lived experience and intersectional oppression cannot be disregarded. In light of Lasar’s (2007) argument about media activism working *on* media as much as *with* media, we consider how the results from our

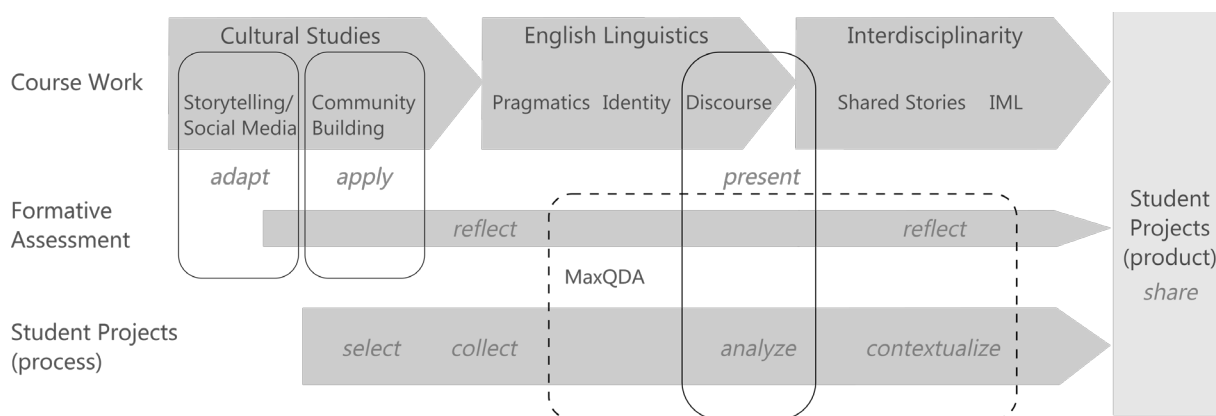


Figure 1: Structure of class, including course work, stages of formative assessment (instructor feedback, peer feedback, and self-reflection), and student project. Centered skills in italics.

analysis, if viewed via the concept of the shared story, can become instructive for approaching IML. We thus argue that sharing also operates on an educational level. Building on our work in the project SKILL.de at the University of Passau, Germany, we outline ways of sharing stories (knowledges, beliefs, skills) in teacher training to enable future teachers to retell, adapt, and remix these stories for their work in the EFL classroom.

Hashtag Activism in Teacher Training

#BlackLivesMatter. #BringBackOurGirls. #End-Speciesism. #MarchForOurLives. #GeorgeFloyd-WasMurdered. #LeaveNoOneBehind. #StayAtHome. #TakeAKnee. These are just some of the examples our students chose to work on in their projects examining the mechanics and influences of hashtag activism in the United States and beyond. In his essay “Narrative Agency in Hashtag Activism,” Guobin Yang (2016) defines the phenomenon as “discursive protest on social media united through a hashtagged word, phrase or sentence” and highlights the “power of digital activism in shaping public discourse” (p. 13). This basic definition already hints at the necessity of an interdisciplinary framework if one is to acknowledge the specificities of narrative, discourse, or even the hashtags themselves as well as their interplay. In 2020, we collaborated for the class “#Activism and Social Media Movements: Political Communication in the Digital Age” at the University of Passau with the aim of attending to this complexity from the perspectives of English linguistics (Regina Holze) and American/cultural studies (Florian Zitzelsberger). The class was designed for students enrolled in teacher training and adopted an interdisciplinary approach that allowed students to become familiarized with scholarly discourse from a range of disciplines, with excursions leading beyond our primary focus on cultural studies and linguistics. After students created a glossary with key terms in group work – including activism, hashtag, media activism, social media, and political communication – the class entered three successive phases (see figure 1).

The first segment focused on cultural studies and introduced students to theories of storytelling and community building on social media. The second segment, dedicated to a linguistic approach, included modules on pragmatics, language and identity, and discourse. Students were required to fulfill and hand in tasks accompanying their course work in phases 1 and 2 that served as scaffolding for the last segment. As shown in fig. 1, students’ projects and their progression regarding course work were supplemented with a feedback process overlapping with both, as well as offering the possibility for self-reflection. Formative assessment proved vital to the overall construction of the class, which was conducted asynchronously due to the COVID-19 pandemic: Students worked independently on course materials, through which they were guided by written commentary, podcasting elements, screencasts, and learning videos produced by us. Their assignments provided them with structure that would therefore also help with the organization of their projects. In this approach, feedback and self-reflection form the basis for the processual acquisition of a critical IML, enabling students to develop competences on their own. We will address implications of this focus on IML and the changing role of the teacher below.

Sharing Stories, Sharing Grievances

Ruth Page’s notion of the shared story, which informed the third segment of the class, provides an interdisciplinary framework for engaging with hashtag activism. We will supplement her deliberations with approaches from cultural studies and linguistics that were part of the first two phases outlined above:

1. Hashtag activism is facilitated via social media platforms and therefore allows multiple tellers to co-construct a narrative online. This is possible because social media deconstruct a dyadic model of communication and break down the hierarchies between public and private media (Miller et al., 2016). Social media blur the boundaries between sender and receiver integral to static models of

communication, allowing for a potential open-endedness. In Page's formulation, these stories are constructed both in processes of telling and sharing/distributing, the latter being facilitated by the technical affordances of social media and the hashtag itself.

2. While hashtags originated as a means of collecting metadata, with the hashtag tagging online elements with information about these elements (Mottahedeh, 2015), they have developed into a narrative mechanic of re-telling and continuance. Because hashtags are searchable items that organize and compile posts on most social media sites, they therefore connect various fragments of what, according to Page, forms a shared story. In line with her second criterion – the shared story as a story connected via intertextual references – the hashtag itself becomes a deictic tool that situates a post in relation to the story as a whole or, in other words, within discourse. In this sense, hashtags are also a way of framing content (Xiong et al., 2019; Hon, 2016). The recurrence of a hashtag across segments pertaining to a shared story thereby simultaneously acknowledges, references, and points at previous iterations and opens up a discursive space for future iterations within an already established frame. Applying Gérard Genette's (1997) terminology, this kind of intertextuality can be viewed as a palimpsest, with every post including the hashtag adding another layer to an already layered, because shared, story.
3. What is remarkable about hashtag activism as a form of shared story is the rapid spreadability of hashtags or hashtagged posts that in part stems from the technical affordances of hashtags as searchable items, hyperlinks, and metadata. In addition, hashtag activism as a form of online activism does not operate within a single platform or medium but rather functions as a form of distributed linearity, to apply Page's term, meaning that a specific hashtag can bind elements together that are produced and reproduced across various segments on

various platforms. Like any digital story, the shared story makes use of multiple proscenia (Alexander, 2017), which connects hashtag activism to transmedia storytelling. Following Matt Hills's (2019) claim that this kind of transmediality helps establish brand omniscience, in the sense of how disseminating information about a product or brand on various channels enhances recognition and value, we might consider how the omnipresence of a hashtag across various media outlets shapes discourse. The hashtag becomes synonymous with the story it tells/shares; it seemingly becomes co-referential with the collective grievances that are given a voice in hashtag activism.

4. While the previous two points are intimately tied to the storytelling process, one that is characterized by telling and sharing as collaborative practice and therefore differs strongly from linear models of communication, Page's last point, shared beliefs, more overtly focuses on what these stories are about and provides insight into why these stories are created in the first place. Paolo Gerbaudo (2017) uses the term "rhetoric of collection" to designate "the way in which crowd-funded social justice blogs aggregate different examples of a particular social grievance" (p. 140). Hashtag activism can similarly be seen as carving out spaces for the accumulation of responses to the concern of a specific hashtag that reflects grievances in society. The idea of a rhetoric of collection places emphasis on the role of community and collective identity, which speaks to Page's idea of shared beliefs: we might follow Benedict Anderson's (2006) work here, which foregrounds the role of the media in establishing social cohesion via the assumption of shared beliefs, the idea being that the systematic dissemination of knowledge in, for example, newspapers fosters commonly held beliefs available to – and thus potentially shared by – an entire body of people who are subsequently bound to a specific community. Such a community is imagined because "the members of even

the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (p. 6). This feeling of inclusion, or of membership, also significantly contributes to the willingness of individuals to adopt or learn a new language. Following Pavlenko and Norton (2007), this impacts the EFL classroom as well by reimagining it as a place “of possibility for students with a wide range of histories, investments, and desires for the future” (p. 678). In this sense, shared beliefs do not indicate an imposition of values or norms on students but are linked to teaching and learning as interdependent *social* processes that have the potential to create communities.

This limitation to the actuality of community in the present, which indeed constitutes a rhetorical construct, is of even more importance in the context of hashtag activism because the online realm on the one hand obscures knowledge about members of an imagined community (due to anonymity and a potentially limitless number of members) and on the other hand blurs various boundaries, such as national, regional, ideological, and linguistic demarcations. In this sense, group identity is configured in discursive rather than geographical spaces; the digital world becomes a countersite from which to challenge hegemonic assumptions about identity. Hashtag activism establishes what Michel Foucault (1986) calls heterotopias, those ‘other places’ that connect spaces – say, the discursive space of #MeToo and the material effects of heteropatriarchy in the United States² – but also contest hegemonic spaces against which heterotopias are positioned. This is also why hashtag activism has become (and remains) a productive way of engaging with minority discourse. As countersites, social media provide individuals with a voice society otherwise silences. Hashtag activism brings together individuals from all over the world who share grievances that remain unseen or unheard and performs resistance by amplifying their voices via practices of telling, re-telling, and sharing.

Expressing Solidarity in #MeToo

Our analysis of #MeToo pursues an interdisciplinary approach with a focus on how the linguistic idiosyncrasies of the shared story perform cultural functions that respond to questions of community and identity. We follow Machin and Mayr’s (2012) approach to Critical Discourse Analysis, which is dedicated to exploring “underlying discourse(s) and ideologies” (p. 20). Because of the multimodality of shared stories, Machin and Mayr’s approach needs to be supplemented with analytical tools specifically relevant for digitized discourses on social media as proposed, e.g., by Marissa Wood (2018). The #MeToo case study served as a model analysis for the students in our class who were gradually guided through the analysis of their individually selected hashtag movements. We employed various techniques of scaffolding, including visual and textual explanations of the different analysis steps, to facilitate imitation learning, which got progressively less detailed to facilitate independent learning. As a data analysis software, we chose MaxQDA.³

The corpus consists of 18,865 imported posts from the social media platform Twitter (tweets) ranging from June 4 to 11, thus providing a snapshot of the #MeToo movement at the very time of the class in summer 2020. Similarly, the students’ corpora encompass their movements’ discourses in a comparably small period of time. The tweets examined are authored by 4,557 different accounts; the maximum number of posts by the same author is 79. Only original posts and replies to them featuring the common hashtag “metoo,” both with and without capitalization, are considered for the corpus, while retweets are excluded. This leads to a research corpus consisting of 276,189 tokens altogether. Our findings are presented according to Wood’s typology of performative functions of #MeToo (see table 1), combining Assertions and Objections under the superordinate of Declaratives.

Promotion of Solidarity

Tweeting in solidarity as a form of social activism, sometimes called “armchair activism” (Mare, 2016, p. 64), manifests itself in different linguistic

characteristics of our corpus. In our snapshot of #MeToo, there are over 180 counts of variations of “I stand with you” or “I believe you” evoking a feeling of solidarity and togetherness. Corroborated by the pronoun analysis, which shows a distinct division in “us” and “them,” the community feeling is also mirrored by the co-occurring hashtags #feminism (56 hits), #women (37), #believeallwomen (33) and #believewomen (32), highlighting the gendered (dis)belief in survivors’ stories and especially their strong digital support.

Narration

Performing the speech act of narration and aligning oneself with a large affected group was the original intent behind the hashtag.⁴ By sharing their experiences, victims of sexual harassment show the extent of the problem they describe and at the same time expose the underlying toxic culture, just as several victims do in our sample. While some use the opportunity to describe incidents rather unambiguously or name their attacker, e.g., “I’m here to [...]

Performative Function	Linguistic Content Criteria
Promotion of Solidarity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shows sympathy / empathy, e.g., “I am with you” Sentiments of togetherness, e.g., “you are not alone” Sole #MeToo tweets
Narration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Storytelling: shares details regarding own experience of sexual assault / harassment; also: references to the past without detailed information (i.e., alludes experience is too terrible to tell) Identifies perpetrator (naming, blaming, shaming the perpetrator)
Declaratives	<p>Assertions: call for norm creation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gives definitions States norms, e.g., “This is how it should be” Gives suggestions what to do / how to (re-)act <p>Objections: call for norm re-creation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gives definitions (“is not”) Objects to how things are, identifies unacceptable behavior Expresses disgust: the way things are is wrong / reprehensible / abhorrent; things should not be that way
Meta-activism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Speaks about the hashtag itself Comments on number of #MeToo tweets / activity Discusses how the movement unfolds Repertoire of contention: tweets as a tool to spread information
Plug	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Connects #MeToo movement to another movement Tries to push another idea, story, event, ...
Criticism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Criticizes the movement or the hashtag

Table 1: Typology of Performative Functions of #MeToo Tweets, adapted from Wood 2018.

warn other women about [name of perpetrator]" (@Lex_da_Rex, June 9, 2020), others prefer to stay vague or just state that they are affected, too, without wanting to elaborate:

"[...] I don't think I'll ever be able to share my story, it hurts too much. But i have forgiven the person who wronged me even tho justice wasn't served" (@NICOLEKIDAMN, June 9, 2020).

This user counts themselves in this group, even though they might not be able to tell their story publicly, creating a shared grievance and strengthening the movement.

Even though 67% of the tweets are written from within the United States, as indicated by the geotags in the metadata of the tweets, two newspaper articles from Japan and India are featured prominently as well, which can be seen in the list of the ten most frequent collocates. "[J]apan s metoo movement" and its parts rank seventh to ninth in most frequent combinations of three words, i.e., 3-grams, and go back to a single headline about a sexual-abuse lawsuit in a work context, which is commented on in 42 cases. This example illustrates the significance of traditional media for a social movement, especially one that is rather widely disseminated due to existing for such a long time. Headlines like the one from Japan keep alive the feeling of urgency and righteousness and combine it with the comfort of internationally shared norms. By addressing this and other similar lawsuits, the media fulfils the demands of the activists for more accountability of perpetrators and at the same time fuels them even more in form of a more radical change of the existing system. However, terms like abuse, victim, rape, harassment, or assault are not within the range of the thirty most frequent words, which might hint at a turn in the movement's focus from sexual assault and workplace harassment to (violent) discrimination on a broader scale.

Declaratives

Assertions with the intention of creating or solidifying a norm or the reiteration of shared beliefs as well as objections calling out unacceptable behavior are frequently found in the data. The assertions and reiterations mostly take the form

of suggestions or advice given to victims of sexual abuse but also state unwritten rules for behavior in a work, sports or political environment, whereas objections are more frequent with users challenging unacceptable actions and describing how wrong certain behaviors or social conventions feel to them after #MeToo. The sentiment is predominantly encouraging and supportive towards victims within a solidarity frame. The expression "i'm not" occurs mostly in combination with specifying collocates in postposition, like "AmeriKKKan," "punk," "Democrat" or "Republican" or "an angry white guy", which are connoted negatively in the posts. However, no collocate is mentioned disproportionately often. Nevertheless, the disassociation with specific groups remains problematic as the sentences continue with "but" in 62% of the cases, suggesting an opinion in line with an aspect that is typically ascribed to this group just rejected.

Meta-activism

Meta-activist tweets intend to expand the scope of the social movement by commenting on the hashtag itself, the activity of the movement, or the relevance it has acquired over time. Whereas "movement" is the sixth most frequent word with 1,278 hits, there are only few users in our corpus discussing the width of the #MeToo movement as such. By contrast, various users commented on the irony that after years of #MeToo, two candidates who both had been accused of sexual misconduct were to compete in the 2020 presidential election. An overlap of the previously mentioned functions, particularly the promotion of solidarity and narration, with meta-activism can be found in the co-occurrence of other movements such as #BlackLivesMatter that feature a similar motivation for the activists' anger because of shared grievances, which is indicative of a growing solidarity among minorities and the heightened awareness of the scope and intersectionality of discrimination: "My feminism is intersectional. My feminism is #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo; I believe that every woman and girl should be just as safe taking an evening walk as every man and boy; I believe that it's okay to be trans or non-binary, and I believe in the human dignity of refugees" (@Tsubugs, June 9, 2020).

Plug

Posts connecting #MeToo to a second movement, either as an additional hashtag or in the tweet itself, amount to about one third of the corpus for #BlackLivesMatter (416 hits) and the abbreviated #blm (238).⁵ After #MeToo itself, these were the most prevalent hashtags in the corpus. In some cases, #MeToo might have been added to extend the audience, but it seems the primary intention was to make a connection between the grievances of victims of sexual harassment and of Black people as structural problems of society. The murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd immediately preceded our time frame. #GeorgeFloyd is the 11th most frequent hashtag in our corpus (45 hits), with #TakeAKnee (38), another movement with the goal of raising awareness of racism and police brutality, and #EnoughIsEnough (39) echoing this sentiment. However, the link between the two social movements can also originate in the illocutionary transformation of the hashtag #MeToo from a marker of specific discourse to its function as a kind of textual like-button, expressing the authors' support of the second movement by validating the experiences with their own stories. #MeToo thus functions as an act of performativity in the Austinian (1962) sense: By adding the hashtag to a post, users align themselves with a given movement – *they, too*, share the grievance of not being listened to, respected, or given agency.

Criticism

Some tweets question the authenticity of stories told around #MeToo and the movement itself. In our dataset, criticism is mostly gathered around the hashtags #AllLivesMatter and #MeToo-UnlessItsBiden. “All lives matter” has been a prominent slogan predominantly promoted by Republican party members in reaction to #BlackLivesMatter to criticize the one-sidedness of the latter, implying that its focus on Blacks was racist and also dangerous to police officers or White citizens in general (May, 2016). The combination of #AllLivesMatter with #MeToo (52 hits) suggests that it is rather a reply to the #BlackLivesMatter movement with authors subscribing textually to the denial of structural racism. #MeToo is therefore understood twofold in this

context: first in its literal meaning of authors counting their lives under those who matter, and second, in a more pragmatic meaning along the lines of the movement around #MeToo evoking the suggestion that they have been wronged by another person or group and now want to raise awareness.

The second critical hashtag, though less prevalent in the corpus, is #MeTooUnlessItsBiden. Twenty-five users complain about the Democratic Party and affiliated celebrities for being supportive of #MeToo and affirming its relevance and validity until their future presidential candidate had been accused of sexual misconduct as well. Now, the tweets claim, those activists have suddenly abandoned the movement in a very hypocritical manner. Tweets with this hashtag mostly come from Republican-leaning users, as indicated by their Twitter bios, and seemingly intend to divert sympathy from Biden.

The analysis of our corpus shows that all of Wood's performative functions are present to different degrees in the movement in June 2020. The posts stem from a rather heterogeneous group, but most of them have the same goal – to be able to live in peace and with bodily integrity. The key themes mainly circle around the feeling of grievances including women's experiences of sexual misconduct as well as not being heard when reporting it. They are joined by Blacks in the related movement #BlackLivesMatter, sharing the anger about not being respected or treated as equals. Society is criticized as a patriarchal structure which favors (White) men of power and established elites. Activists mostly feel they have no agency in those encrusted structures, and even if they try to blend into the system, they are still abused, exploited or ignored. However, speaking with Gayatri Spivak (2008), the global subaltern can now come together and raise their voices virtually in hope of finally being heard. Seconding this feeling, another main finding is the widespread solidarity of a supportive international and digital audience for those sharing their experience under #MeToo, who are united in their strong desire for a change in their respective societies.

Sharing and Telling: Hashtag Activism, Literacy, and Collaboration

In this last section, we highlight potentials of hashtag activism – as shared stories – for the acquisition of IML. According to Guido Pollak et al. (2018), digitization and an increased mediatization of discourse in all areas of social life necessitate the formation of skills that help the individual navigate the complexities of a world whose online and offline environments are ever-changing. They approach IML theoretically and methodically through the pillars of historicity, culturality, and constructivity (pp. 39-40). Page’s notion of the shared story helps us understand how hashtag activism can become a tool for developing IML according to these three aspects. While co-telling emphasizes the mediality and media-specific affordances of social media platforms and as such hovers over the other constituents of the shared story, intertextuality and distributed linearity more overtly foreground an affiliation to questions surrounding the construction of meaning: What functions does a hashtag serve? How does it connect posts, platforms, and people? Who can contribute to a hashtag movement? What dangers does this hold? Hashtag activism can serve as a case study of learning how to engage with social media in a meaningful way, not only in terms of reception, but also by prompting a critical reflection of media use in professional as well as private contexts. It also makes transparent practices of (social) affiliation by proxy of a social media account or digital presence. IML therefore plays an important role in social participation because it is required to express one’s stance within a given discourse.

The question about positionality also connects to the last of Page’s characteristics, shared beliefs, and the aspects of historicity and culturality. While co-telling, intertextuality, and distributed linearity can be seen as facilitators of the discourses discussed in our analysis, shared beliefs are shaped through these discourses. It is therefore important to understand the historically specific and culturally contingent position of hashtag activism in order to render meaningful

individual posts one encounters online or to contribute to digital discourse, and to eventually “produce media for social and political good” (Fry, 2014, p. 127). Media reception and production go hand in hand according to IML, and implementing hashtag activism in the higher-education curriculum or the EFL classroom will empower students as prosumers rather than uncritical consumers. The emphasis of shared stories on collaboration and common ground equally emphasizes that IML additionally needs to focus on “ideology critique and analyzing the politics of representation of crucial dimensions of gender, race, class, and sexuality” (Kellner & Share, 2007, p. 8) because participation in society requires an understanding of power structures and the accepted truths that lead to the formation of communities in the first place.

Coming back to our analysis, we see how #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter articulate grievances – and express solidarity – shared by minorities and, as such, make visible the power structures that keep systemic racism, heterosexism, and (trans) misogyny in place. In contrast to how IML can be acquired via critical readings of fictional representations, the relation of the digital world to lived experience in our example of hashtag activism makes IML immediately relevant to students’ lives and the adversity they might face themselves. To this end, our case study has shown several aspects important for achieving an ethnorelative stage in the model of intercultural sensitivity (Bennett, 1993): Understanding the construction of an us-versus-them narrative based on gender, race, or their intersections helps students accept cultural difference (the extent to which discrimination in Germany and the United States are similar, yet different) and evaluate their own position in relation to such debates. Students will also be able to adapt a way of negotiating these differences and engaging in political discourse. Lastly, our findings support the idea of integration in the sense of both becoming part of a community and integrating skills into one’s engagement with the digital sphere. Learning how to read hashtags can become a way of making sense of a globalized world characterized by a high degree of connec-

tivity, making IML a prerequisite for responsible citizenship: “Competent digital citizens are able to respond to new and everyday challenges related to learning, work, employability, leisure, inclusion and participation in society, respecting human rights and intercultural difference” (Council of Europe, 2019, p. 12).

Working with Page’s phrasing, we might consider teaching itself a way of telling and sharing stories. This is not to say that teaching follows a linear model of communication or functions unilaterally. On the contrary, as our focus on hashtag activism and digital political communication shows, telling and sharing are intrinsically connected and move beyond a dyadic notion of communication by making IML a collaborative project. Making the stories co-created via #MeToo or #BlackLivesMatter objects of study also means sharing a space for negotiating skills together with students and encouraging them to retell, reshare, or remix these stories and train their own skills – related to the selection, decoding, and evaluation as well as the use, creation, and dissemination of information – with one another as well as with their future students.⁶ Julian McDougall (2014) argues that such a collaborative encounter “is required to redistribute power” (p. 9) in education as well as in society at large. We therefore suggest that sharing be viewed as a metaphor for an inclusive pedagogy: as educators, it is our duty to amplify voices and to empower; as students, it is our duty to engage in this process. In this sense, students themselves have a lot to teach – and it will be our continuous duty as educators to listen. Teaching as a site of co-telling speaks to the importance of IML as a form of education, agency, and resistance. And telling the stories of #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter in the classroom and beyond invariably constitutes an activist effort.

Endnotes

¹ This paper discusses research conducted in the project SKILL.de (Strategien zur Kompetenzentwicklung: Innovative Lehrformate in der Lehrerbildung, digitally enhanced) at the University of Passau, Germany.

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² Sara Ahmed (2013) reminds us that when social space is occupied (which it inevitably is), some individuals will not be supported by the shape social space takes because of the weight normative bodies carry and the impressions they create. Apart from this rather metaphorical use of space, Ahmed also attends to the material effects of such occupations: Actual space is built around – and thus supports – a very specific ideal of citizenship, allowing hegemonic subjects to navigate the world they inhabit blithely while the paths of others may become blocked (pp. 423-425).

³ The students were each granted a free MaxQDA course license for the term.

⁴ Tarana Burke used the hashtag #MeToo first in 2006, but it has only become popular globally following a tweet by actress Alyssa Milano in 2017 (Gill & Rahman-Jones, 2020).

⁵ Wood’s notion of the plug originally designates the inclusion of unconnected trending hashtags to enhance visibility. The co-occurrence of #MeToo and #BLM in our sample is not coincidental, but Wood’s remarks nonetheless help us understand the significance of the shared story told via the two movements.

⁶ It is noteworthy that undertaking such an effort also requires moving across disciplinary boundaries. With our interdisciplinary approach, we move beyond the separation of linguistics, cultural studies, and literary studies that structures the higher-education curriculum for English at German universities.

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