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## **Globalization, Technologies, and Digital Culture in Graduate Contexts: Intercultural Possibilities and Challenges**

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### **Abstract**

This study focused on interculturally juxtaposing different higher education communities' experiences with digital culture and technologies. The dialogues created among researchers from three different countries – Brazil, Canada, and the UK – contribute to an exchange of reflections and problematizations of what innovative and ubiquitous pedagogical practices are like. For the past few years, especially due to COVID-19, researchers have identified the impact of digital culture on educational practices in different universities, highlighting there is a need to further understand the relationship between the advancements in digital culture and its outcomes for innovative educational practices. The participants in the study helped the research team to consider the possibilities and challenges of digital culture in education by sharing perspectives on: 1) the conception educational communities in universities have about innovation, educational practices and digital culture; and 2) the relationship of instructors, students, and other members of the educational community (e.g.; secretaries, deans, head of departments) toward educational practices that include innovation, and digital culture in their day-to-day practices. Our discussions broadened the notions of innovation, and digital culture in educational practices by inviting professionals from universities from different contexts to reflect on intercultural aspects that shape new dialogues to negotiate tensions among educational practices within digital culture.

### **Keywords**

Digital culture; Innovation; Intercultural; Higher education; Globalization.

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# **Globalization, Technologies, and Digital Culture in Graduate Contexts: Intercultural Possibilities and Challenges**

## **Introduction**

This paper is a snapshot of a larger research study whose objectives were to understand some of the possibilities and challenges of digital culture in graduate contexts – Brazil, Canada, and the UK. Along with theories on the impact of globalization, technologies, and digital culture in education, our discussions inform the potentialities and challenges of digital culture in community building and development in higher education.

Globalization, technologies, and digital culture have indeed modified the notions within higher education programs (Hassan et al., 2022; Tight, 2021). Some examples of ongoing changes in the field relate to the fast and vast flow of information, access to information, and the interconnection among people from different communities. Undoubtedly, the conceptualization of globalization, technologies, and digital culture has inferred positive outcomes in the current higher education contexts (Anka, 2019). However, because of the many ways one can identify the impact of these aspects in educational scenarios, this study explored intercultural perspectives that can confront meanings and innovate practices (Lemoine & Richardson, 2019).

Globalization, technologies, and digital culture have been synonyms of improvement and advancement, and consequently, this view has masked social issues such as racial discrimination and identity marginalization, as well as reinforced a neoliberal ideology that validates capital over knowledge construction (Canagarajah, 2012; Ferraz, 2018; Godwin-Jones, 2017; Kumaravadivelu, 2012; Moura, 2015). By considering these factors from an economic point of view, for example, globalization, technologies, and digital culture are represented rather poorly in universities today (Whittemore, 2018). For example, the idea that globalization, technologies, and digital culture contribute to quicker increases in profit is a strategic move that institutions have used to attract clientele (e.g., students). Wisely, the global university market makes investments in ads and social media and propagates its multi-millionaire numbers, and unfortunately, a great portion of society sees those numbers as the most appropriate form of knowing if those institutions are doing well or not within a globalized world.

Technology itself, from a neoliberal perspective (Moore et al., 2021), represents devices and artifacts with the latest trends in commands and software. From the smallest devices such as iPods to bigger ones like automobiles, technology has significantly been related to advancement and autonomy. The access to those pieces of information and the spread of idealized educational standards have been possible due to digital culture (Mihelj et al., 2019). The latter works as a means to consolidate hegemonic cultures through globalization which are often represented by the market as the wealthiest places to study, shape a successful career, and better the chances of making money.

The rich outcomes of being in a globalized and high-tech educational institution have shaped local learners' understandings of hegemonic cultures, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic (Abu Talib et al., 2021; Moore et al., 2021). Consequently, if universities are able to sell themselves as both wealthy and technologically equipped, those places would absolutely solidify their economy and politics. The messages being conveyed in higher education today state that with more capital, one has more chances to be globalized (Liu, 2020). Additionally, with more capital, one becomes better technologically served, after all, iPhones are the latest trends for mobile devices with their software speed and highly protected hardware systems, and laptops become essential in doing and developing one's job. Consumerism, therefore, is key to identifying some outcomes of globalization, technologies, and digital culture within the current society.

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When considering globalization and technology, society undoubtedly benefits from them too. Information is everywhere and there is access to it at any time. The sense of interconnectedness has played an extremely important role in people as they know facts from different parts of the world (Anka, 2019; Liu, 2020). Knowing what goes on around the globe shapes people's identities as new values and beliefs are shared amongst people. By the simple duty of learning about different cultures on a web search, people have gotten enough to reconsider their concepts and change or reinforce their ideas and positionalities. In theory, the more access you have to information, the more you can negotiate and provide some ground for your thinking.

Indeed, globalization does portray a diverse range of realities. Looking at it from Ferraz's (2018) perspective, globalization can actually serve society from a top-down scale, as much as from a bottom-up scale. Both are more common in cultural studies (Canagarajah, 2002; 2012; Kumaravadivelu, 2008; 2012), thus globalization and technology are dealt within two extremes: one that looks at the elite who profits from capital gain through investments in big corporations, and the other which reflects communities from the grassroots, or communities that have been marginalized but that have shown new ideas and challenged some mainstream patterns of behaviour.

Overall, this paper is an attempt to broaden the debates on the significance of globalization, technologies, and digital culture in higher education programs. This was a qualitative research study that focused on the perspectives of Brazilian, Canadian, and English participants (e.g., educators, administrators, and staff), who were considered both protagonists and subjects during the investigation process. We conducted 23 semi-structured interviews with professors, administrators, students, and employees from three universities located in those three countries. We relied on post-Critical research methodologies (Meyer & Paraíso, 2012) in order to expand our ways of seeing, deconstructing and reconstructing different investigation processes, seeking to invent and reinvent the construction movements of different knowledge.

The different perspectives, explored here, are useful to locally and globally reflect on educational practices that propose more diverse, authentic, and critical learning. In order to defend critical learning, Kumaravadivelu's (2003; 2012) notion of a sustainable challenge is an addition to the existing paradigms of knowledge. That means making use of hybrid approaches for teaching in which educators ought to rethink their practices and critically encompass diversity in teaching. Moreover, in addressing and being aware of hegemonies, higher education contexts have the space to challenge standardized kinds of knowledge (Block & Cameron, 2002).

There is no global norm other than realizing and accepting people who come from different places with different experiences. Rather than fitting everyone in the same box, globalization, technologies, and digital culture must operate in a matter of considering the dissimilarities of society and contributing to new and diverse knowledge construction. Believing in the art of research, we risk questioning the data produced in order to understand the phenomenon in focus. Some results show the importance of interculturality, ecological pedagogy, and innovation as possibilities and challenges in the context of digital culture in graduate studies across the globe.

## **Digital culture: Interculturality, ecological pedagogy and innovation**

Faced with an increasingly digitized society, we face the challenge of rethinking our educational practices and going beyond those we have been used to for a long time. With ongoing changes in notions of time and space (Santaella, 2003; 2021), educators are invited to rethink how they can hybridize cultural exchanges, constructions and productions of different types of knowledge. In addition to a technical perspective of focusing on the technology itself, as Martín-Barbero (2003, p. 281) stated, there is a belief that “[...] the study of tech usability forces us, then, to shift the space from interest of the media to the place where its meaning is produced [...]”. Therefore, educational practices at universities ought to understand the digital culture from the needs, desires, and appropriations that such a community has of it.

Regarding digital culture, Santaella (2003) foregrounds this study as she considers digital culture to be a derivation of the evolution of other cultures, or passages from one culture to others according to the process of evolution of humanity. Looking at how meaning-making processes have orally and written developed, they have enabled individuals to experience cultural exchanges through the masses, the media and the several digital forms (Santaella, 2003; 2021). There are cumulative and substitutive processes of old tech supports for new ones, including other and different technological means, producing media hybridity. According to the theories that inform this study, digital culture has to be conceptualized beyond its technological determinism, one that emerges from its uses and social appropriations of everyday life (Almeida e Silva, 2014).

Due to the different possibilities that digital culture provides, such as sharing, remixes and hybridizations, other ways of building and socializing knowledge emerge, which defines digital culture as of the “future” (Silva & Alonso, 2018). In addition, as Lemos (2013) points out, digital culture is the product of a synergy between the technological and the social, which urges educators to understand whether it is necessary to adopt a multidisciplinary approach along with its dimensions of use, consumption, and appropriation. In the context of this study, digital cultures emerge in settings of use of socio-digital networks, in different times and spaces, with other and different configurations.

Undeniably, we are living in the era of the "Internet of things" (Lemos & Lévy, 2010), where everything communicates and is part of a broader network. Devices and objects are interconnected, enabling the creation of information and communication networks, informing our daily experiences and, moreover, our academic interrelationships. There is potential for collective and collaborative (Mihelj et al., 2019; Santaella, 2023; Tight, 2021) learning supported by cyberspace, with plural and participatory social and communication dynamics.

From this perspective, between gaps and fissures (Whittemore, 2018), interculturality allows us to think and promote more dialogic and egalitarian relationships between groups with different cultural spaces (Candau, 2005). As researchers, we do not want to say that power relations are inexistent in digital culture’s different scenarios, but by recognizing and assuming those dynamics exist, we will be able to seek strategies to face them.

The digital possibilities enable transformations such as breaking a hegemonic discourse and creating ecological pedagogies (Miranda & Pischetola, 2021), which cross different knowledge, experiences, concepts, and environments, promoting more reflective practices. According to Miranda and Pischetola (2021), in addition, ecological pedagogy teaches us that our educational practices can be redefined, reformulated, and redesigned in a more collaborative way.

Under these redesigns, innovation (Mill & Pimentel, 2020) can emerge, as long as it is accompanied by curricular changes and the introduction of new teaching and learning processes, ideas, people, and materials. According to Leite (2012), technological innovation must accompany pedagogical innovation and the latter must respond to the social commitment to the human development of teachers and students.

By considering the impact of globalization on the development of educational technology tools and the role of the digital culture in higher education contexts, below we present some methodological choices adopted in this study.

## Methods

This is a qualitative research study that followed a post-Critical approach. By post-Critical (Meyer & Paraíso, 2012; 2014), such perspective is translated into understanding and developing research methodologies believing that:

[...] we build our ways of researching moving in various ways: back and forth, from one side to the other, from the sides to the center, making contours, curves, moving away and approaching. We distance ourselves from what is rigid, essences, convictions, universals, the task of prescribing and all concepts and thoughts that do not help us build images of powerful thoughts to interrogate and describe-analyze our object. We approach those thoughts that move us and put our questions in check. We move to prevent the 'paralysis' of the information we produce and that we need to describe-analyze. We move, in short, to multiply meanings, forms, and struggles. (Meyer & Paraíso, 2014, p. 18-19)

We used semi-structured interviews, combining closed and open questions on the topic of digital culture articulated with educational practices. We had 23 participants, who were members of three different universities: one from the Midwest of Brazil; another from east-central England; and a third one from central Canada. Among the participants who got involved in the study, they can be put into different categories: department heads/managers, professors/instructors, grad students, and employees of varied programs (e.g., Education, Peace and Conflict, Tech Education, Biology, etc). We sought to listen to the participants share their narratives and aimed at delving into the meanings they created. We maintained the anonymity of the participants and went through the ethics committee for the development of this research.

The interviews took place online, via Google Meet, and were recorded and transcribed for later analysis. Under the umbrella of the role of digital culture in the participants' contexts, the themes that emerged include innovation, ubiquity, educational practices, technologies, and interculturality. We read, organized, and discussed the data as a team in order to understand the specifics of each program. The data that is explored in this paper, in particular, focuses on the possibilities and challenges we identified when working with the digital culture in different contexts.

We assumed a methodological perspective that meets what Meyer and Paraíso (2012, p. 272-273) list as paths and procedures:

“to doubt the instituted by giving up homogeneous and fixed meanings and concepts; to assume theoretical approaches that encourage the denaturalization and problematization of the things we learn by giving up the concern to locate cause and effect relationships, origins, and processes of evolution; to take the examination of power as a central element of the texts under analysis by relating conditions of emergence of the subject positions and/or objects studied; to strange what is accepted as normal by denaturalizing it”.

## Unpacking Participants' Experiences

We sought to understand what the participants expressed about digital culture in the context of the *Stricto Sensu* Graduate Programs and the results pointed to two overarching themes: the possibilities and challenges one can face given their situated practices. We stress that we aimed at working with the “[...] intersubjective, [and that] human understanding requires openness to the other, empathy, and sympathy” (Morin, 2015, p. 73). Moreover, “human understanding requires comprehension, but above all, it requires seeing the other and that the other lives” (Morin, 2015, p. 80).

## Identifying the Possibilities

Connection and empathy were points presented by a Canadian Manager when thinking about the possibilities that digital technologies foster in and outside of the classrooms:

[...] I am very interested in the power of the possibilities within technology for fostering connection and empathy. [...] I am very concerned with finding ways to use developments in technology both in and out of the classroom. Not just to connect students, to bodies of knowledge, but to connect the university to the wider community.

The connection mentioned by the participant goes beyond the teacher-student relationship. Additionally, fostering connection and empathy (Friesem, 2016; Walker & Venker Weidenbenner, 2019) among students in a classroom and the other stakeholders reshapes individuals' knowledge and the participants' sense of belonging to different communities. In this sense, valuing empathy and other experiences, which come and go from beyond the four walls of the classroom, is an example of integrating digital tools to innovate the outcomes that will be reflected outside of these educational institutions.

In this sense, analyzing the impact of COVID-19 in higher education and the movement toward appropriating different technologies and online software into pedagogies, there is potential to re-signify educational practices and experiences: “[...] now with the pandemic, everything has changed, it doesn't seem like those classes [...] it changed, I had to readapt” (Brazilian Professor). According to Santos (2018), to be an educator means to act in complexity, which makes individuals open to other learning possibilities, question patterns that might have been imposed on them, and investigate how their acts as educators foment critical social transformation. Santos (2018) further suggests that educators need to learn how to ask themselves how and why they teach, so their pedagogical choices match some of the social gaps we find today.

Indeed, the appropriation of digital technologies and transition to a more immersed practice in digital culture offers insights into changes in pedagogical approaches (Blundell et al., 2020; Weis et al. 2002). However, is such a practice embracing all its opportunities or just maintaining a pedagogy supported by non-situated, binary, uncritical, hierarchical, and linear conceptions? The possibilities that digital culture can provide when we take advantage of the critical uses of digital technologies emerge when subsidized by formative processes, those that provide opportunities for the constructions of different knowledge aligned with contextual needs (Blundell et al., 2020; Lemos & Lévy, 2010; Weis et al. 2002).

For the Brazilian Coordinator:

People need to get closer to this and, above all, they need to learn to use it, and they need help to be able to learn to use it. Because not everyone is self-taught in all fields of knowledge. And especially when fields of knowledge provide things that have a certain degree of sophistication, which is another type of sophistication compared to the sophistication that person is used to and in which he moves comfortably as a researcher and as a teacher. So, I think that training programs are needed there. More serious and less occasional training programs to be able to make this transition in mentality.

Transformations can occur loaded with supposed innovations. However, we understand as Cardoso (1993) argued, that innovation needs to be intentional and to break into a current situation. Once that type of innovation is performed, educators will be able to contribute to the modification of something instituted in the educational reality, sometimes imposed by the management itself. Therefore, the digital culture in all its flexible features (e.g., time, space, accessibility), allows us to revisit, extend, and (re)create our practices. According to the English Manager, for example:

[...] my number one is flexibility. I think it gives us a chance [...] it helps us to meet the needs of students, [...] engagement, [...] the speed. [...] But there are all sorts of reasons why students might benefit from a chance to revisit material, revisit an engagement sometimes. And you can share it with apps and people which is brilliant, and I know pros and cons of that in terms of participation, but I think the fact that you can [...] in a session is wonderful. I really like the fact that you can extend and augment something, create something together in a session, you can record it, layer it, add to it. (Adm1-UK)

Perhaps the possibility of revisiting pedagogies contributes to sustainable education that helps us also encounter the possibility of reconnection (Burbules et al., 2020). According to Morin (2015), the reconnection of human beings with nature and the cosmos can provide a deeper dialogue between scientific and humanist cultures. By situating ourselves in the universe, we can understand how local and global forces connect to each other (Burbules et al., 2020; Morin, 2015).

Therefore, the need to analyze the conditions and requirements of the contexts and communities in which such innovative practices are taking place is essential for unveiling challenges that could emerge. This analysis, which is often restricted to the psycho-pedagogical and technical dimensions (Ferreti, 2011), should dismantle socio-political and educational one-size-fits-all realities. Consequently, innovation in this regard urges us to reflect on the reason why we employ such concepts in our practices (Friesem, 2016; Leite, 2012).

## **Learning from the Challenges**

From this study, we understand that digital culture is permeated by power dynamics and social structures (Friesem, 2016; Walker & Venker Weidenbenner, 2019). In higher education environments, especially in the Graduate Programs observed in this study, people share opinions, experiences, practices, and knowledge, and reproduce social behaviours whether in-person or virtually. It is important to recognize that digital culture is not neutral and that digital technologies are not impartial (Duncombe, 2019). Although they may envision a democratic environment, it is important to consider who such alleged democratization benefits (Bernholz, 2021). Inequalities emerge with a view that everyone is equal, with the same possibilities of access and expression of their voices:

"[...] I do not consider that this digital world is a world that will fit everyone and that everyone will fit [...] some processes of social inequalities assert themselves as this digital culture comes to be an almost unavoidable condition for us to live our contemporary life" (Brazilian Manager).

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Surely, the digital culture enables cultural flows characterized by the access to different forms of reading and constantly developing of communication skills and the establishment of interpersonal and intercultural relationships (Canclini, 2018). However, such digital flows, marked by the fluidity, instability, and dynamism of relationships, pose challenges from less authoritarian and hierarchical educational practices: "I am always connected; this is very good for an administrator. For the university, it is good, for the management process, it is good. But for the individual, sometimes I don't think it is good. Why don't I ever disconnect, it causes a significant pressure increase" (Brazilian Manager).

Another challenge found in these participants' experiences was the intensification of the teaching load. With the possibility of being present on several platforms at once, the educator can end up having to manage a large volume of information and interactions with students and colleagues at the same time. In addition, the need to maintain a constant presence on social networks can lead to an overload of work, as the educator becomes available to students outside of conventional working hours (Recuero, 2014). According to the Canadian Manager:

I don't know anybody who's really enjoying this process and finding it better than being physically present in the classroom. I don't know anybody who's finding it an improvement. I think some people are appreciating the blended learning opportunities and the ability, you know, there are different ways to structure knowledge, acquisition, so that it's not just one thing, but a lot of us, you know, especially after a day of zoom meetings, you know, I can have six hours of zoom meetings and then a three-hour class [...] I feel my work is crowding out every other part of my life. And I'm not enjoying that feeling very much. This is the kind of job. And I know, you know, that can take up all of your life if you let it. And I think it's always a challenge to strike a balance between work and life, especially if you're doing something you genuinely care about. So, you think about it all the time, you know, I think there's important weights that I need to segment my life in order to be productive. And I think the ubiquity of this technology and its intersection with my recreational technologies, [...] it's just something that's unwelcoming.

The challenges exist and need to be highlighted so that a distorted image of the implications of digital culture in the practices of educational communities is not established (Almeida & Silva, 2014; Hassan et al., 2022). There is an inequality of access to technology, which can lead to digital and educational exclusion (Moore et al., 2021), and digital technologies can overwhelm educational practices when used excessively. Therefore, it is important that we are aware of their benefits and risks so that we can carefully consider which tools to use in establishing educational practices that are more inclusive, beneficial, and inspirational to other forms of knowledge (Miranda & Pischetola, 2021).

## Furthering Debates

We can open space for further debates from what was presented and discussed in this work. We know that innovation accompanies digital culture, but that it needs to be situated, occurring in specific contexts and developed not from a top-down stream. Moreover, innovation should be developed in a collaborative way, in this case, involving all educational community members in decision-making, and considering creative troubleshooting skills according to local needs.

As seen in this paper, the notions of globalization's impacts in higher education fall into two main distinctions. First, globalization has either reinforced or challenged the notion of knowledge. Second, globalization has undoubtedly emphasized technological use as the main feature of a more globalized and modern classroom (Godwin-Jones, 2017; Kumaravadivelu, 2008; 2012; Schmidt, 1990; Thorne, Smith & Smith, 2015). Indeed, globalization reinforces the notion of knowledge if educators passively ignore how digital culture reconfigures the flow of information, the reshaping of new identities, and the global awareness of their students. Once these are not considered in educational settings, educators start from a point that everyone has or should have the same knowledge, which implicates marginalization of non-mainstreamed ways of knowing. (Thorne, Smith & Smith, 2015; Warschauer, 2002)

The current status of education should be celebrating diversity and multiplicity, challenging hegemonies, and seeking other alternatives for interpretation and expression (Thorne, Smith & Smith, 2015; Warschauer, 2002). Unfortunately, as much as digital culture provides freedom, individuality, and originality, it also emphasizes coloniality and it is not an entirely benign outcome of globalization (Block & Cameron, 2002). Being aware of that means demystifying what we understand by digital culture learning today.

In addition, we must remember the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on our lives, including education, opened up the existing inequalities in relation to access to technologies, and the necessary conditions to teach and learn with quality and sustainability (Burbules et al., 2020). We question how much we know about technologies in the sense that they can provide us with better spaces and times for discussions, learning, exchanges, and the production of different knowledge and cultures.

Questioning what technologies have done in our lives is fundamental, but also is what we have done with them to improve our coexistence. These are some concerns that haunt us. A relevant question within this matter should also reflect the preparedness of educators when dealing with globalization and technology in classrooms. A perspective on how new educators are being exposed to such tools in their education (Faez & Valeo, 2012; Larsen-Freeman, 2018; RLG, 2014) shows that higher education programs have taken globalization and technology for granted. Both have become so naturalized in our society that programs believe individuals know how to approach and use globalization and technology in their favour in their education.

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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.