

Kate Vieira, Assistant Professor
English Department
University of Wisconsin, Madison
kevieira@wisc.edu

Appropriating new communication technologies in migrants' home communities: A case study from Brazil

ARTICLE:

Abstract

This paper presents preliminary results from an ongoing qualitative study of the impact of migration on the uptake of new technologies in transnational migrants' home communities, namely Jaú, Brazil. Migration scholars have documented how transnational migration is often undertaken to pay for children's or family's formal education. Yet migration itself has its own pedagogy, one that is at once technological, social, and cultural. A crucial part of this "pedagogy of migration" involves family members learning new technologies to communicate with loved ones abroad. This study traces the uptake of these technological and pedagogical remittances in one community to find that such remittances are often exchanged for cultural capital and career advancement in local economies.

Keywords

Transnational, Migration, Communication, Pedagogy, Remittance, Brazil

Project overview

There are many motivating factors for transnational migration (Massey et al., 1993), but among them is the pursuit of better life through educational opportunities for migrants' families who stay behind (Nobles, 2011). To this end, migrants often remit money to family to provide for private schools and school supplies (Levitt, 2001). Yet less considered is the pedagogical impact of migration itself, part of which includes the learning and teaching of new communication technologies to negotiate migrants' absence. How are transnational communication techniques taught and learned? And what impact does such informal education have on the wider uptake and use of the internet in migrants' home communities? This paper presents preliminary results from a qualitative study that answers this question

Relevant Literature

Two strands of research inform this study. First, literacy scholars have begun to examine the pedagogy of transnational communication technologies from the perspective of migrant youth. Lam and Rosario-Ramos (2009), for example, find that transnational youth in the U.S. use the internet to negotiate ethno-linguistic identity. Second, migration and communication scholars have considered how families and children use internet technology to communicate, developing their relationships in line with the affordances and limitations of particular media (Mandiou and Miller, 2012; Parreñas, 2005). While the first strand of research addresses pedagogy, it does not address migrants' home communities. And while the second strand addresses migrants' home communities, it does not centrally account for pedagogy. The present study fills this gap, theorizing transnational digital literacy pedagogy in informal, non-school spaces.

Methods

This paper draws from a qualitative study conducted with migrants' home communities in Jaú, Brazil. The outmigration of Brazilians has corresponded historically with a rise of Internet technologies for writing (approximately 1980's to the present) (Margolis, 1994), making it an ideal site for the study of networked technologies in a migratory contexts. Jaú, a small manufacturing city with a population of approximately 130,000, has a moderate rate of out-migration, allowing the researcher to track the role of migration-related technology remittances as they develop alongside communication practices that are perhaps uninfluenced by migration. In Jaú, one can see where the influence of migration on Internet use starts and stops.

My preliminary findings are based on 15 completed oral history interviews, one to three hours in length, with Brazilian migrants' family members, which took place both in Jaú, Brazil and from the researcher's institution in the U.S. over Skype. These interviews covered three central themes: First, I elicited information about how family members communicated with migrants, including personal letters, emails, phone calls, chats, online video conferencing. Second, I elicited participants' memories about how they learned to use such technologies, such as when they first remember using a computer. Finally, I asked participants to describe how they used Internet communication technologies in their daily work and personal lives. I analyzed these interviews using grounded theory methodologies (Charmaz, 2006). My coding categories included: how particular technologies contribute to feelings of proximity or distance; the material and practical means by which migrants sponsored family members' learning of new communication technologies (such as by giving them a computer and/or teaching them how to use it); the way that transnational communication technologies permeated local interactions and professional goals.

Findings and Discussion

This paper offers three central findings: First, communication technology is often viewed by participants as a material part of an exchange relationship. For example, many received computers as gifts from abroad. This gift giving, however, also entails an implicit exchange: that family members will learn to use the technology to communicate with more frequency. The exchange of communication technologies and pedagogies, however, does not end with this reciprocal gift giving. It is passed around locally, leading to the second finding: Those who received computers initially from migrants abroad took on what I am calling the role of the "post office." They often became hubs of Internet connectivity that attracted neighbors and other community members. Migrants' family members often taught neighbors how to use particular technologies—Gchat or MSN chat, for example. Such lessons contributed to participants' cultural capital, allowing them to call on these neighbors for reciprocal favors. Finally, for many, their family members' migration coincided with increasing local pressure to use computers and Internet technologies specifically for work. The desire to maintain contact with family and the challenges of competing in an information economy inter-animated each other, pushing participants to the forefront of technological innovation in their workplaces. I call this technological and pedagogical remittance "writing remittances" to highlight its connection with older literate practices of letter writing, to emphasize its exchange value, and to distinguish it from other from other Brazilian remittance practices (Siqueira, 2008). The writing remittance sent from migrant to family member, then, is on one hand, dispersed locally, and on the other hand, taken up to forward participants' own social standing.

Such findings have two central implications. They corroborate Madianou and Miller (2012) and Rhacel Parreña's (2005) findings that communication technologies are socialized in accordance with their context. But they go further, to show how transnational migration can motivate the dispersal of technological knowhow. Such a conclusion links new communication technologies to older ones in the history of mass migration. Historian David Gerber (2006), for example, documents how migrants in the late 1800s to the U.S. had to teach family members to address envelopes to send through the nascent international post. Just as the movement of people may have contributed to the rise of mass literacy via letter writing in the early late 19th and early 20th century (Henkins, 2007; Lyons, 2013), it also may be contributing to the rise of mass internet literacy in our current moment. The second implication follows from the first: That migration scholars must broaden our understanding of educational remittances. Money for tuition may be crucial in the lives of children and family left behind. But engaging with Internet technologies used to communicate with a distant loved one may also contribute to the upward social mobility that motivated migration in the first place.

Works cited

Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. London: SAGE.

Gerber, D. (2006). *Authors of their own lives: Personal correspondence in the lives of nineteenth century British immigrants to the United States*. New York: New York University Press.

- Henkins, D. (2007). *The postal age: The emergence of modern communications in nineteenth century America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lam, W.S.E and Rosario-Ramos, E (2009). "Multilingual literacies in transnational digitally-mediated contexts: An exploratory study of immigrant teens in the U.S." *Language and Education* (23.2):171-190.
- Levitt, P. (2001). *The transnational villagers*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Lyons, M. (2013). *The writing culture of ordinary people in Europe, 1860-1920*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Madianou, M. and Miller, D (2012). *Migration and new media: Transnational families and polymedia*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Margolis, M. (1998). *An invisible minority: Brazilians in New York City*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Massey, D. et al. (1993). "Theories of migration: A review and appraisal." *Population and Development Review* 19(3): 431-466.
- Nobles, J. (2011). "Parenting from Abroad: Migration, Nonresident Father Involvement, and Children's Education in Mexico." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 73(4): 729-746.
- Parreñas, R. (2005). *Children of Global Migration: Transnational families and gendered woes*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.
- Siqueira, S. (2008). Emigrants from Governador Valadares: Projects of return and investment. In C. Jouët-Pastré, L. J. Braga, and C. Suárez-Orozco (Eds.) *Becoming Brazuca: Brazilian immigration to the United States*. (pp. 175-194). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies.