Chapter 17
Will Social Media Replace Face-to-Face Interactions in International Collaboration Discussions?

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ABSTRACT

Within the education-research cooperation AustrIndia-4QOL, 102 teenagers from Austria and India jointly conducted research on the topics 'quality of life' and 'sustainability'. While the collaboration was mainly carried out via social media, some of the teenagers took part in an additional one-week face-to-face collaboration. This chapter offers insights into the effects of the collaboration on students' concepts of the quality of life perceptions of teenagers from different socio-cultural backgrounds and on their awareness of the importance and impact of environmental aspects on quality of life and their willingness to act towards more sustainable lifestyles. Social media enables learning experiences that cannot be facilitated within classical educational settings and should therefore be afforded greater attention in formal education. However, examination of the AustrIndia-4QOL project shows that social media collaborations have their own limitations and that the total removal of the opportunity for live face-to-face interactions is questionable.

INTRODUCTION

There is widespread agreement that further human development on this planet will ultimately depend upon the willingness and capacity of individuals as well as societies to undertake a fundamental transformation towards sustainability (IPCC, 2021; Kubisch et al., 2021; UN, 2021; UNEP, 2021; UNESCO, 2022). To enable humans to take action for sustainability, education has to undergo a profound, if not revolutionary, change. It is hoped that Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) will be the key enabler for achieving all Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and that it will play the most important role in providing learners with the required competencies (Schank & Rieckmann, 2019; Stoltenberg & Michelsen, 2020; UNESCO, 2022).

Nowadays, all these issues are strongly linked with the question of whether the use of digital media will help assist this learning revolution. After all, digital media is not only predicted to improve traditional learning settings, but also to completely redefine them. The possibilities for self-regulated and informal learning with the help of digital media supports a constructivist understanding of learning, and offers opportunities for networking and cooperating with other learners (Brendel & Schrüfer, 2018). Participation in societal processes as well as initiating and questioning them is another benefit (Kanwischer, 2014). The use of digital media in this capacity can make a valuable contribution for achieving the competencies mentioned in various competency frameworks for ESD (Lozano et al., 2017; Rieckmann & Barth, 2022; UNESCO, 2017; Wiek et al., 2015).

Research studies exploring the effects of social media in education settings frequently emphasize positive effects (e.g., Greenhow & Galvin, 2020) and Dron and Anderson's claim that such learning is transformed and has a more socio-constructivist approach (Dron & Anderson, 2014). Critical voices, however, propose that discussions via social media run the danger of remaining superficial because a lower quantity of information tends to be exchanged between participants in comparison with the quantity transferred in face-to-face discussions (Jeong, 2013). Kirschner feels that, in general, the structure of social media sites does not support the exchange of different opinions and perspectives since these tools are mainly used for self-presentation and due to algorithms people are primarily connected with other people who share similar interests and opinions (Kirschner, 2015).

The education-research-collaboration "AustrIndia-4QOL" (Teenagers from Austria and India perform research on Quality of Life) gives us the opportunity to compare the effects of social media and face-to-face discussions. This article examines how far an international collaboration of 56 teenagers from India and 46 teenagers from Austria leads to an increase of students' awareness of the importance of environmental aspects for quality of life (QOL) as well as to an increase in their willingness to act toward more sustainable lifestyles.

Within the project, one group of students took part in a collaboration restricted to social media (Social Media Group) and another group, who took part in a collaboration via social media and face-to-face collaboration (Face-to-Face Group). This provides the opportunity to compare the effectiveness of both learning settings and leads to the following research hypotheses:

1. An international collaboration based on social media influences students' concepts of the QOL perceptions of teenagers from different socio-cultural backgrounds.
2. An international collaboration based on social media increases teenagers' awareness of the importance of environmental aspects for QOL.

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