Discussing culturally relevant books online: A cross-cultural blogging project

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> *ABSTRACT: This article examines the process and results of a two-year cross-cultural blogging project conducted between American fifth-graders (15 students) and Taiwanese tenth-graders (23 students). The two groups of students used a blog to correspond with each other and share their reading responses of culturally relevant picture books. The goal of the project was to provide the students with opportunities to appreciate reading texts relevant to their cultural experiences, while using the blog to engage in authentic conversations with and reflect on the experiences of people from another culture. Data were collected from multiple sources, including pre-project surveys, students' blog entries, students' retrospective interviews, and the researchers' field notes. Data analysis helped answer the research questions: What were the students' learning experiences, and what factors helped form the experiences? The findings suggest that students gained deeper understandings of another culture, as well as the texts, as they were offered opportunities to communicate authentically with people of another culture. They also displayed more confidence and greater critical thinking skills when discussing culturally relevant picture books.*
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> *KEYWORDS: Blog, culturally relevant literacy, cross-cultural interaction, literature discussion*

INTRODUCTION

> Hi, Shung-pei:
> I'm miki. sometimes I don't get things either, and sometimes we can't communicate and we protect ourselves, but I know how you people in Taiwan feel and I feel the same way. we are across the pacific ocean and we are communicating with each other, and I don't know you and you don't know me and we have different cultures but we are getting to know each other. your friend miki, P.S. send me a post.

Miki (all the names used in the article are pseudonyms), a fifth-grade African American girl, posted the message above to her online group partner, Shung-pei, a tenth-grade Taiwanese student. Both students were reading culturally relevant picture books and sharing with each other their reading responses online. Miki was excited about the opportunity of getting to know Shung-pei, someone from a different culture across the Pacific Ocean.

It has been long established that English language educators should provide students with reading material that "mirrors their own experience back to them" and that "insists upon the fresh air of windows into the experience of others" (Style, 1988, para. 39). Our world is becoming more diverse, with increasing varieties of ethnic

populations within society; it is also becoming flat, as historical and geographical divisions are eliminated by globalisation (Friedman, 2005). Therefore, when multiculturalism is emphasised in today's literacy education, it is essential for English language educators not only to provide culturally relevant reading texts to their students, but also to introduce other peoples' experiences to them (Bishop, 1997; Galda, 1998; Glazier & Seo, 2005; Higgins, 2002; Yokota, 1993).

Although educators may define multiculturalism from different perspectives (Carcia, 2002; Yokota, 1993), multicultural literacy instruction generally involves introducing texts written about diverse cultural groups into classrooms (Barrear, 1992; Harris, 1993; Yokota, 1993), emphasising culturally responsive pedagogies by valuing students' cultural and social experiences (Au, 1998; Gay, 2000; Moll & Gonzales, 1994), and inviting the silenced to reflect on their own experiences and eventually to take action to confront inequity in literacy definitions, practices and policies (Botelho & Rudman, 2009; Sleeter, 2011). Therefore, while we (the two researchers and the two classroom teachers participating in the project) hold that education should help students develop "understandings of the interdependence among nations in the world today, clarified attitudes toward other nations, and reflective identifications with the world community" (Banks, 2008, p. 28), we also maintain that education should promote culturally responsive instruction, "making students' home or heritage cultures central to the literacy curriculum" (Au, 2008, p. 120) and accordingly help raise students' pride of their cultural identities (Vyas, 2004) and legitimise their real-life experiences (Delpit, 2006).

The current literature shows that although many literacy teachers have implemented culturally relevant books in the classrooms, seldom have any of them simultaneously examined the development of students' awareness of both their own culture and that of others. Thus, we decided to conduct a cross-cultural project – which eventually ran for two years (2007-2008) – between an American elementary school and a Taiwanese high school. A blog was used as a tool of interaction and a means to access others' cultures through online discussions. Our aim was to explore what this project did to the students' learning experiences. We sought to find answers to these questions: What happened to students' understandings of another culture? How did they react when they discussed books culturally relevant to them? What factors helped form their learning experiences? This article presents the findings obtained from the study with the hope of adding further understandings to the current body of knowledge on multicultural literacy instruction.

READER RESPONSE CRITICISM

Our project was situated theoretically within reader response criticism. Reader response theorists "embrace an extremely wide range of attitudes toward, and assumptions about, the roles of the reader, the text, and the social/cultural context shaping the transaction between the reader and the text" (Beach, 1993, p. 2). They "focus on the reader's role during meaning construction, and a range of perspectives exists" (Brooks, 2006, p. 375). Seeing the importance of the reader's role, we particularly follow Rosenblatt, the experiential reader response theorist. In her book, *The Reader, the Text, the Poem* (1978/1994), Rosenblatt uses the term "poem" to refer to "the whole category of aesthetic transactions between readers and texts without

implying the greater or lesser 'poeticity' of any specific genre" (p. 12). She believes that when readers are reading, they pay attention not only to "what the signs pointed to in their external world, to their referents," but also to "the images, feelings, attitudes, associations, and ideas that the words and their references evoked in them" (p. 10). She argues that the reading process is a "transaction" between the reader and the text, and rejects the attitude of seeing reading as solely a process of finding the meanings in the text or in the reader's mind. Instead, she states, "The finding of meanings involves both the author's text and what the reader brings to it" (p. 14). The relationship between reader and text is never linear, and consequently the reader's creation of a poem out of a text must be an "active, self-ordering, and self-correcting" process (2005, p. 28).

Brooks (2006) believes that experiential reader response theorists offer "a compelling argument for the increase used of African American children's books in classrooms" (p. 376). It is because "this literature allows students from African American backgrounds to 'see themselves' depicted in print, the books provide opportunities for linking cultural knowledge and experiences to text worlds" (p. 376). Although Brooks' focus is on African American students, we believe that this argument can be expanded to advocate the introduction of culturally relevant books into any literacy classrooms, so that students of diverse cultural backgrounds can be encouraged to "attend to their own conceptions, their own experience, bringing the literary work to bear upon their lives and allowing their lives to shed light upon the work" (Probst, 1992, p. 60).

PREVIOUS STUDIES ON USING CULTURALLY RELEVANT TEXTS

Introducing culturally relevant texts allows students to see their cultures represented in the school environment. This, in turn, has led to successful engagement in reading, as culturally relevant books "engage the learner in the concepts being taught on a more meaningful and personal level; and they create an inclusive learning environment" (Purnell, Ali, Begum & Carter, 2007, p. 421).

Over two decades ago, Sims (1983) conducted a landmark study of an African American reader reading African American children's books. The results showed that the culturally relevant texts initiated the reader's interest and engagement in the stories. Since then, many other studies have been conducted and accordingly have demonstrated support for Sims' argument, inviting students to explore their community, history and heritage and therefore to value where they come from and who they are. Freeman, for example (Freeman & Freeman, 2004), used miscue analysis to compare students' reading of a culturally relevant book with their reading of another book having little cultural relevance. Freeman's findings revealed that students made higher quality miscues and produced better retellings with the culturally relevant story.

In her case study, Packard (2001) used culturally relevant literature and shared reading strategies to help her Chinese mother become interested in reading. As time went by, the texts by Asian or Asian American authors featuring Asian or Asian American characters not only engaged the mother but also initiated conversations over family history between the mother and daughter. Packard commented:

> I realised that she was noticing progress in her reading, and this was the first time that
> she had read so much in English. I also realised that it was the first time I knew so

much about the Chinese part of me, and that my admiration of my mother and grandmother had grown a great deal. (p. 63)

Implications of Packard's study indicated the potential benefits of using culturally relevant texts to create family literacy programs and therefore to help immigrant students to fill the intergenerational, intercultural gap with parents in terms of language and traditions.

Feger (2006) also demonstrated the effect of the implementation of culturally relevant texts. As a classroom teacher, Feger observed that textbooks focusing on grammar helped her 9th and 10th grade ELL (English Language Learning) students to master a sufficient command of English grammar to participate in classroom lessons. However, she also realised that the books did little to engage her students, much less develop their literacy. When recognising that her students' cultural diversity determined their opportunities for success in literacy, Feger led her students to read stories depicting immigrant children and to share their responses to the stories in dialogue journals. The results showed that her students became more engaged in reading and their scores on the high-stakes test improved.

THE CROSS-CULTURAL BLOGGING PROJECT

Participating students

We recruited a group of fifth-graders from a mid-west American school and a group of tenth-graders from a metropolitan Taiwanese girls' school. Consent from both the students and parents was obtained. The American school was located close to a university and had a close relationship with the university, frequently inviting the faculty to conduct a variety of action research in the elementary school classrooms. The Taiwanese school was a prestigious girls' high school in the south Taiwan and the students took pride in their academic achievements among peers nationwide.

We chose older Taiwanese students because English writing instruction does not begin until secondary education in Taiwan, and therefore the written communication in English would not have been possible if the Taiwanese had been younger. Likewise, we did not recruit older American students as the Taiwanese students, with their limited English writing skills, would have very likely been discouraged by the comparatively excellent rhetoric displayed in a tenth-grade American student's writings.

As the project lasted two years, during each academic year we recruited different groups of students from the two schools. The information of the participating students is presented in Table 1. When recruiting the students, we did not particularly select students based on their ethnicities. Any student showing interest in the project was welcome to join. As a result, in the American group, in addition to the majority Caucasian students, one Chinese ELL (English as a Language Learning) and one Latino student participated in the first year, and in the second year three African American students and one Bulgarian ELL student participated. The Taiwanese students were all of Chinese heritage.

	The USA Group			The Taiwan Group		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
1st Year	1	5	6	0	10	10
2nd Year	3	6	9	0	13	13

Table 1. Demographics of students participating in the project

The numbers of students initially recruited in the two groups were even. However, after some time, several American students dropped out because of activity conflict and transportation difficulty. In the end, a total of 15 American students and 23 Taiwanese students participated over the two years.

The picture books

We used picture books for discussion, not only because they can easily be read in one sitting, but also because picture books can enhance literacy learning, cultivate social awareness, and develop critical thinking in both older and younger students (Burke & Peterson, 2007; Murphy, 2009; Wilkins, Sheffield, Ford & Cruz, 2008). For the Taiwanese students, picture books were expected to be particularly motivating, since the books had predictable plots, repetitive refrains, and imaginative illustrations that helped offer clues for predicting the textual meaning (Chang, 2008; Hsueh, 2007; Shih, 2009), and therefore would provide support for the Taiwanese English language learners.

Picture books of multi-cultural themes were chosen as the reading texts for both groups, with the intention of exposing the students to diverse ethnic heritages (that is, Chinese, Korean, Native American and African American, and so on) and to stress cross-cultural understandings. When evaluating the validity of the titles chosen, we adopted the suggestions presented by Gilland (1999), asking questions such as: Was the book interesting? Was the readability level appropriate? Was the book culturally and historically accurate? Did the illustrations authentically depict the people and location? What were the author's attitudes toward the people? Did the book portray the people and values in a positive way? In the end, a total of eight books were chosen and read throughout the project.

The communication tool – the blog

A password-protected blog was created for the students to build a community and share their reading responses. In previous empirical studies, teachers of English have chosen various Internet tools (such as Blackboard, blog and email) to involve students in online literature circles (Beeghly, 2005; Bowers-Campbell, 2011), cross-cultural exchange programs (Cha, 2008; Greenfield, 2003), and cross-cultural book discussion activities (Liaw, 2006; Müller-Hartmann, 2000). Our project used the blog as the tool for communication, because we recognised that blogging has emerged as one of the most popular forms of online discourse (Bloch, 2007), and the statistics published two years prior to the study had shown that creating blogs and reading blogs were becoming popular among teenagers aged 12-17 (see the report by Lenhart & Madden,

2005[1]). We also found the blog particularly appropriate for this project because of its threaded, hierarchical structure and the direct links between original texts and reader comments (Godwin-Jones, 2003; Richardson, 2010), which made it easy to publish, to respond to and to track. We therefore created a blog on the host, Blogger.com, and invited students to post their thoughts, to comment on each other's postings, and to upload images and audios or video files. (See students' example entries in Figure 1.)
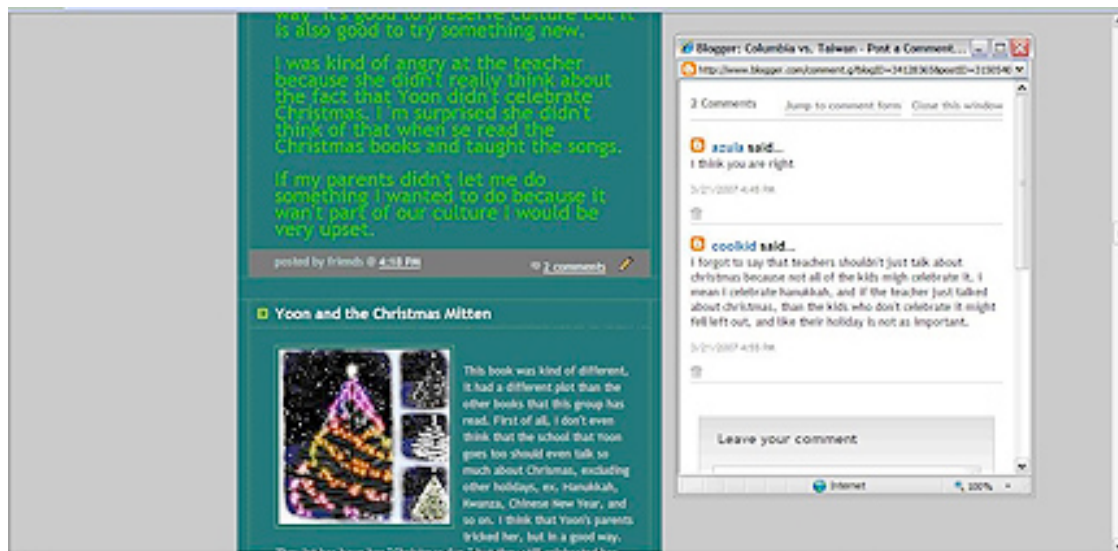

Figure 1. Students' example blog entries

Learning activities

Although participating students in each of the two years were different, the program was repeated as the same complete cycle each year. The first month of the academic year was allocated for the students to get to know one another. The students posted their self-introductions and chatted freely on a weekly basis. From the second month on, the students were asked to read and discuss the books within their own groups and then respond on the blog using either the instructors' prompts or their own topics. Comments to one another within groups were also strongly encouraged. During the meeting hours, the instructors at the two schools led the students through discussions of the books, focusing on the themes, the elements reflecting the specific cultures, and any other literary designs. The instructors also assisted the students with writing ideas but did not offer editing help. Editing was not strictly required, and students' posts on the blog were to be more spontaneous and expressive than formal and rigid.

Students were engaged in the same learning tasks in both schools. However, considering their older age and heavier academic load, the Taiwanese students' learning activities varied slightly from the American students', meeting less often, reading independently, and completing the online posting at their leisure at home (see Table 2).

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[1] A more recent report by Lenhart, Purcell, Smith and Zickuhr (2010) indicated that blogging had declined in popularity among both teens and young adults since 2006 because of the change of social networking websites. However, 14% of online teens still say they blog.

	The USA Group	The Taiwan Group
Group Meeting	Eighty minutes after school, approximately once a week	One hour during the midday recess, approximately every other week
Reading	The instructor read the picture books aloud to the students	The students read the picture books independently
Discussion	The instructor and the group discussed together; the instructor provided prompts but also encouraged spontaneous insight	
Writing	Students posted at the school's computer lab during the meeting hours	Students posted at home after school

Table 2. Learning activities students were involved in

As the project progressed, Lee (the lead researcher) regularly attended the American students' meetings (taught by Mrs. Dickinson) in the computer lab. Lee provided occasional technological assistance but mostly circulated around the room, taking field notes (see Figure 2). During the winter and summer breaks, Lee visited the high school in Taiwan to meet with the instructor, Ms. Lin, and the students. Rapport was built and the instructor's and the students' opinions about the activities were canvassed. At the end of the school year, we collected students' posting entries and conducted individual and small-group interviews. The semi-constructed interview questions asked students to reflect on what they liked or disliked about the project, what picture books impressed them most, what they had learned by reading them, how they liked or disliked the blogging activity and why, and what they had learned by reading each other's postings. As a result, we were able to collect data from multiple sources to analyse, including the students' blog entries (203 entries in the first year and 438 entries in the second year), students' retrospective interviews (13 individual interviews and six group interviews), communications with the instructors and students, and the field notes.

Figure 2. The researcher present at the computer lab to provide assistance

RESULTS

The students gained authentic knowledge of another culture

The cross-cultural correspondence and sharing of reading reflections on the Internet helped the students to gain genuine understandings of their partner students' cultures. When the project began, the students on both sides knew little about each other. Many American students had never heard of Taiwan; conversely, most of the Taiwanese students' knowledge about American culture came from textbook articles or Hollywood movies. Misunderstandings were sometimes caused by limited knowledge or a skewed perspective about the other group. For example, when the students first corresponded online, some of the Taiwanese students asked the American students about their blood types, which the American students found odd as they had never been asked this question by anyone other than a doctor. The researcher then had to explain to them that Asian people also see blood types as an indication of personality traits.

Over time, as the students regularly corresponded with each other, a community of support was built. Students' blogging entries showed that they employed social discourse moves (Barnes & Todd, 1977) to express agreement, approval and shared feelings. Moreover, they gained knowledge about each other's culture from first-hand sources. For example, when discussing *Me and Mr. Mah* (Spalding, 2001), a book telling about a cross-cultural friendship between an American boy and an old Chinese man, a Taiwanese student wrote about the Chinese name "Yan" (meaning "wild goose") that the old man used to call the American boy, Ian. Hsiao-fang wrote:

> Yan is a kind of birds like the picture on the book. It is free to go anywhere. It can go anywhere [if] it wants [to]. Ian moved to a city. It is far from his father's farm. Just like "Yan", he flew to a far place. I think that's why Mr.Mah called him like that. (December 11, 2007)[2]

This insightful explanation attracted eight replies from the American students. Hsiao-fang's knowledge of the Chinese character helped her American friends learn something new about her culture.

Kevin, an American boy, posted on the Internet about his mom asking him to "go feed and water the chickens" after school (April 3, 2008). In the interview, Na-la, a Taiwanese student, recalled how surprised she was when she read Kevin's posting. She said:

> Kevin talked about going back home to feed the chickens. I was laughing out loud. Such an unexpected answer! It never occurred to me that kids have to go back to feed the chickens. For us, it is always going back home and doing our studies. (May 18, 2008)[3]

As shown in the examples above, communication via the Internet provided a strong forum for students to genuinely connect with people from another culture and learn about each other's cultural beliefs and ways of life.

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[2] Students' posting entries have been edited to help appropriately convey the messages.
[3] All the Taiwanese students' interviews have been translated from Mandarin

The picture books also allowed the students to access cultures unfamiliar to them in an authentic way. For example, Hsiao-fang, a Taiwanese student, talked about the black and white social justice issue presented in *The Other Side* (Woodson, 2001). She said:

> I was not sure if there was still this kind of segregation. I wondered why it existed. Some article I read said that the law ruled that black people had to give their seats to the white on the bus. I read that in the textbook. So this picture book made me see this was really happening. (May 16, 2008)

Hsiao-fang's knowledge of American history was confirmed by the story book she read. Her understanding of American history was deepened as the picture book presented it in the social context of that time.

The students confidently contributed online

Reading culturally relevant books led the students to view their own cultures in a positive way. The students' confidence grew when they participated in the discussions. The Taiwanese students especially benefited from the choice of books, because many of the books were either set in China, had a Chinese main character, or were adopted from ancient Chinese folktales. For example, one Taiwanese student, Chen-na, expressed excitement when reading English texts that presented Chinese images and cultural traits. She said, "I feel that if a book has some Chinese elements in it, when I read it, I will be thrilled that English books talk about Chinese culture" (June 5, 2008). The culturally relevant books also helped bridge the gap the Taiwanese students felt when reading a text in an unfamiliar language. Chieh-ming commented that she could better understand the message delivered in the texts since she felt that she "experienced those or was familiar with that kind of environment" (May 20, 2008). Consequently, the Taiwanese students felt confident when discussing the books, and they were able to contribute substantially since they were knowledgeable about the books' contexts. Kuei-lan recalled that she purposefully chose to answer those prompts related to the Chinese culture, since she assumed that the American students did not know so much about them, and she had much to offer.

The Taiwanese students also appeared more self-assured when expressing their opinions. Shung-pei and Hsiao-fang discussed the wise, female prime minister in *The Greatest Power* (Demi, 2004), a book describing a Chinese emperor seeking the best answer to the question, "What is the greatest power in the world?" Shung-pei wrote:

> It's not easy for a young emperor to think about the difficult question. Of course, Sing is also very special to find the answer. But, in the real Chinese history, it's impossible for female to be prime ministers, and Sing is just a little girl! (March 4, 2008)

Hsiao-fang responded, "I agree with the idea. Female was not treated as a man by people in ancient China. Female was demeaned at that time" (March 6, 2008). These two students' comments suggest that they were able to evaluate the text according to their deep understanding of the context in which the story was situated.

For the American students, when discussing *The Other Side* (Woodson, 2001), a book with the central metaphor, a fence dividing blacks from whites, the African American students in the group responded enthusiastically. They appeared to have more viewpoints to share with others. For example, Miki, an African girl, wrote three

comments in response to the Taiwanese students' postings, discussing the significance of the fence (April 10, 2008, 5:24 PM), a response to the story ending when the two girls became friends (April 17, 2008, 5:13 PM), and an agreement with the arguments that skin colours did not matter and it was people's hearts that counted (April 17, 2008, 5:13 PM). Instead of superficially saying, "I agree with you" (which Miki used frequently when leaving comments on people's postings), she responded to three different discussion topics by making insightful comments. This demonstrated that she was interested in the discussions and that she had many deep thoughts to share.

Another African American girl, Anna, showed a strong connection to the text as well. During the two weeks of discussions about *The Other Side* (Woodson, 2001), Anna made a 260-word post, her longest post, and also a great jump from her average posting length of 96.4 words. (See Figure 3 for part of Anna's posting entry.)

this book
rocksssssssssssssssssss

I think that this book was trying to compare itself with segregation and that the fence was separating Annie and Clover from being together and when they were walking past each other they were gazing at each other like they wanted to say somethign to each other. But Clover knows what her mother was going to say but when they got friends with each other they got to know more about each other. The first time that Annie asked to play jump rope with them they said no then the other time that she asked when Clover and she were friends they said yes she can play. It seemed like that Annie had more money than Clover because of the way they dressed. Annie dressd more fancy like . . . like she was going out to dinner or something. Clover dresed like jsut a normal person that has a little bit of money. As these friends go conjoined together, they started getting attached to each other . . . like maybe their

Figure 3. Part of Anna's posting entry

The following week, Anna posted another passage about this book. She wrote:

> In the picture that Annie's mom is always wearing pretty dress that just came out of the package that they bought. And Clover's dresses have little stains on them. But they are ok to wear because my mom washes them (April 10, 2008).

These two post entries showed that Anna's rich background knowledge, as well as her concerns about the culturally relevant issue, inspired her to closely examine the context and make self-text connections. In the last sentence of her example post, when she pointed out that in spite of the little stains, her dresses were okay to wear because her mother washed them, this African American girl, coming from a less privileged class, demonstrated her self-esteem and pride. For Anna, the text was no longer simply an object but rather an expression of experiences true to those in her own life.

The students displayed the ability to think critically

This project encouraged the students to share their opinions with one another through the Internet, which contributed to the sophisticated thought processes displayed in the students' writing. The students' thoughts expanded, because they were able to build on each other's ideas. For example, Lydia, a girl of mixed African-American/white heritage, said that at first she was wondering, "what am I supposed to do?" Then she read the post done by a Taiwanese student, Ning-ning. Lydia recalled, "When we talked about *The Other Side*, she really got me into it" (April 24, 2008). Lydia ended by posting lengthy comments on the racial discrimination existing in American history.

The interaction with another culture also opened the students' eyes. The students became more aware of perspectives which differed from theirs. Rachel was a Chinese-born girl and adopted into a Jewish family. When discussing the book, *Yoon and the Christmas Mitten* (Recorvits, 2006), she reminded her peers that there were people in the world who did not celebrate Christmas.

After Rachel posted her comment, Ray, a Caucasian boy, also posted his, apparently inspired by Rachel's discussion about Hanukkah:

> … it is a very good introduction to the religious life of an immigrant at an American school were [where] we are all very public about our celebrations of Christmas and other holidays such as Easter, Hanukah and Fourth of July. This makes me feel bad because in a little girl's mind it must be like everyone is telling her that all of her religious beliefs are incorrect and that their way is right so that's that. It must be hard for other people like Jewish and Muslims because in America we are mainly a Christian dominated country and it is really hard to fit in be cool and other things like that. (April 4, 2007)

Hearing a different perspective from his peer and reading a thought-provoking multicultural text may have helped Ray to become more understanding and enabled him to put himself in another's shoes and sense the struggles people of non-mainstream cultures might go through.

In addition to feeling empathy for those who were deprived socially, economically or politically, the students also made judgments on the morals presented in the texts. Mary, an American girl, wrote about the main character in *Yoon and the Christmas Mitten* (Recorvits, 2006).[4] Mary expressed an understanding of the character's desire for a sense of belonging, but criticised her failure to value her own heritage. More impressively, Mary pointed out that the US was always the centre of things. She wrote:

> But I think the book would have been more interesting and just for it to be a better book, it should have been an American family going to Korea. It seems to be it's all about the Great U.S.A., Not to say I don't like it here. I truly love being here, but still... (April 4, 2007)

Mary's comment here indicated her awareness of the egocentrism existing in today's American society. Another student, Pearl, coming from Puerto Rico, also made an

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[4] Yoon had wanted to celebrate Christmas with her class but was told by her Korean-American parents that they should celebrate the Lunar New Year instead.

insightful critique when reading the book, *Cheyenne Again* (Bunting, 1995), which describes how a Native American boy longed to go back to his own tribe and be schooled there. Pearl expressed her sympathy when the boy was forced to separate from his family, community and culture in order to fit into the white-dominant society. Then she made a text-to-self connection and criticised the injustice when people were punished for preserving their own cultures:

> I can't imagine how I would have felt if I was forced to leave my friends, family and home. And to be punished for trying to simply be myself would be worse than torture. I speak Spanish at home and it is almost like breathing to me and to be forced to stop would be terrible. (May 2, 2007)

Both Mary and Pearl's examples showed that the students not only sophisticatedly discussed the social contexts presented in the books, they also adopted a critical stance as they assessed the world around them which helped form those contexts.

The students also displayed the ability to closely examine the authenticity of the texts. For example, the Taiwanese students mentioned how they disliked the illustrations of the Korean girl in *Yoon and the Christmas Mitten* (Recorvits, 2006), as she was portrayed with slanted eyes and a round face. One Taiwanese student, Na-la, commented that she disliked the book's stereotypes of the Chinese people. She said, "They draw the Chinese with braids and dressed in red. They are always dressed in red" (May 19, 2008). These examples show that reading culturally relevant texts enabled the students to make critical judgments of the legitimacy of the texts.

CONCLUSION

When conducting this project, we asked what the learning experiences of the students were. We were particularly interested in finding out how students' understandings of other cultures were shaped, how they reacted when they discussed books culturally relevant to them, and what factors helped form their learning experiences. Our findings suggest that this project succeeded in giving the students an outlet to reflect on their life experiences by reading and discussing culturally relevant texts. It also encouraged the students to use the texts, as well as the blog, as a window through which to view someone else's world and therefore to celebrate cultural diversity. As a result, the students' reflections and blog-posting entries indicated that they became more knowledgeable about and appreciative of cultures different from their own. They also cultivated more confidence about their own cultural heritages, and therefore were capable of making thoughtful critiques of the texts as well as of the world. Although this project did not seek to "open doors offering access both into and out of one's everyday condition" and hence to "invite interaction" – that is, to link the students to social practice (Botelho & Rudman, 2009, p. xiii), the students appeared to go further, beyond acknowledgement and appreciation of one's own and others' cultures, by trying to evaluate social justice. Therefore, using culturally relevant texts and providing opportunities for cross-cultural online communication successfully motivated the students, enlightened them, and helped them to reflect on the world in which they live.

Certain limitations, however, did occur. School schedules made it difficult to generate as many online exchanges as expected. In addition, as the project was not required

within the school curricula, it took students' self-regulation to make posts regularly. This was especially true with the Taiwanese students, who did not do their writing at school and therefore were not monitored by the instructor. As a result, although the Taiwanese students outnumbered the American students, their post entries did not. At the American school, as this project was integrated into the after-school program, activity conflicts or transportation difficulties caused some students to drop out. This affected, to some degree, the formation of the learning community in the American group. Therefore, we suggest such pedagogical practices be implemented in the English language classrooms as part of the regular course tasks. This should add value to the blogging activity as a genuine learning task in the eyes of the students. Also, if blogging is done regularly and mandatorily, it could be further incorporated into students' formal assessments for scaffolding draft writing. This should benefit students more than just having them blog as an extra-curricular activity.

As the project came to an end, the students were sad to say good-bye. The poem by Jenny, one American girl (June 1, 2008), expressed all of our feelings: "We had fun, and we will miss the good time, but we will be okay as we will flourish in our own and one another's cultures." This spontaneous piece of writing, rather than connecting to any particular text, suggests the value of leading our students to transform themselves into writers as well as readers in a culturally diverse world.
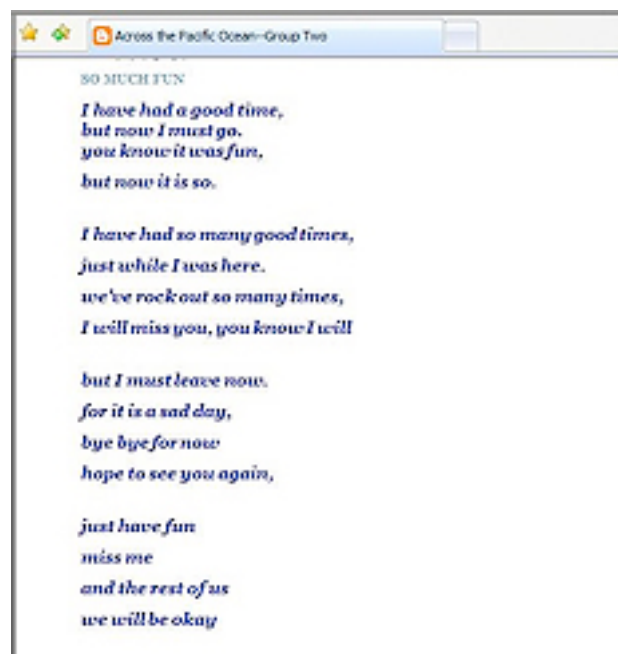

Figure 4. Jenny's final post entry

The cross-cultural learning outcomes are the focus of this project report. However, in the future, further research might be conducted to explore the English learning development of the Taiwanese students as more writing scaffolding is provided. Further investigation might also be carried out, using the Vygotskian perspective of ZDP (which suggests that children learn from more capable peers), to see if there is any shift in the readings of the younger American students. Our project served to initiate a cross-cultural communication, seeking to expand the knowledge of

implementing culturally relevant texts in literacy classrooms. Further studies in other potential aspects should be attempted in the future.

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