Multiliteracies education: Canadian and Hong Kong students connected in a web 2.0 learning environment – A transnational project in collaborating with the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK)

Kevin Mooney and Dr. Jia Li, University of Ontario Institute of Technology (UOIT)

Research Objectives
To strengthen Canada’s deep-rooted ties with Hong Kong (HK), reflecting longstanding and comprehensive political, commercial, bilateral relations (Government of Canada, 2012). The research objectives included 1) to create a social networking platform where Canadian and Hong Kong university students would be able to share and learn about effective teaching and learning practices of multiliteracies to cater to a diversity of learners (The New London Group, 1996), and 2) to enhance university students’ skills and abilities in utilizing, re-purposing, and creating high quality Open Educational Resources (OERs) that benefit diverse learners.

Participants
Student participants included 35 Canadian and 47 HK university students. The Canadian students represented 20 diverse ethnic backgrounds while HK students represented 4 different ethnic backgrounds (see Fig. 1). All HK students were bilingual with English as their second language. 23% of Canadian students reported English as their second language with the remaining 77% reporting being native English speakers.

Project Activities
1) Participants and engaged in discussions with each other through Web Knowledge Forum (WebKF), a social media platform (see Fig. 2). 2) Students were assigned the task of creating online educational resources regarding cultural studies using new technologies (see Fig. 3). 3) Student work was published using available and free services such as YouTube and Google Places. Links to each assignment were posted in WebKF. 4) Students were also given the task of reviewing and commenting on their peers’ work on WebKF. Students offered thoughts, feelings and recommendations on how the project could be improved for international audiences.

The asynchronous collaborative module gave the students a flexibility to think through others’ ideas, construct their own understanding and evaluate the relevance and significance of their responses, while allowing them with certain privacies in contrast to face-to-face interactions in regular classrooms when discussing sensitive issues. This research, which took place among students across continents and with significantly different language, cultural, educational, and professional backgrounds in a multilingual context, provided participants with an exciting and authentic learning experience.

Results of Quantitative Analysis
Overall students in both universities reported enjoying their online interactions with their international peers (also see Fig. 4). In general 1) Canadian students demonstrated a more positive perception towards their experience in online discussions than the HK students (see Table 1). 93% of Canadian students agreed that the experience of participating in this cross-border communication had broadened their vision of the diverse use of new technologies in educational settings. 86% agreed that this experience had helped them to understand the digital communication of others. On the Hong Kong side, 78% of students agreed that participating in this project had helped them to realize the importance of using digital technologies to enhance their communication and learning. 79% of them agreed that as a result of this experience, they would attempt to incorporate cross-cultural communication as well as developing OERs for a multilingual audience. In the Hong Kong side, 76% of students agreed that participating in this project had helped them to realize the importance of using digital technologies to enhance their communication and learning. 79% of them agreed that as a result of this experience, they would attempt to incorporate cross-cultural communication as well as developing OERs for a multilingual audience. 2) The majority of respondents favourably to the use of OERs. Again, Canadian students demonstrated a significantly more aligned perception with the surveyed multiliteracies students stated that they would attempt to incorporate OERs in their future teaching, learning and professional practices.

70% agreed that they would like to provide their final assignments as an OER for non-profit teaching and learning purposes, while 73% HK students agreeing that by participating in this project they had enhanced their digital skills and remained OERs, and 69% of students stating that they would like to provide their final assignments as an OER for non-profit teaching and learning purposes.

Table 1. Differences in Canadian and HK students’ perceptions on online discussions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perception</th>
<th>Canadian (n=35)</th>
<th>HK (n=47)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agreement to provide final assignments as an OER</td>
<td>50.0% (17)</td>
<td>38.3% (18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreement to provide final assignments as an OER for non-profit teaching and learning purposes</td>
<td>70.0% (24)</td>
<td>73.0% (34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreement to provide final assignments as an OER for non-profit teaching and learning purposes</td>
<td>70.0% (24)</td>
<td>69.0% (32)</td>
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Conclusions and Implications
It is clear that the innovative learning environment provided students with an authentic and intercultural context for teaching and learning. The results indicated that, when in tandem with appropriate instructional design, web 2.0 technologies have a great potential to facilitate multiliteracy education and practices through effectively forming transnational learning communities that harness the strengths of diverse students. Social networking and web 2.0 technologies will inevitably become a more attractive medium of instruction for educational institutions, particularly those on restricted budgets (Webber, 2012). Future research will be beneficial to address how to creatively integrate multiliteracy curriculum across subject content areas using cutting-edge technologies, a critical challenge we are facing in Canadian and HK educational contexts as well as on a global basis.

Notes
* “Open educational resources are freely accessible, openly licensed documents and media that are useful for teaching, learning, and assessing as well as for research purposes (Unesco, 2014).
* “Multiliteracies: A new approach to literacy pedagogy which argues that the multiplicity of communications channels and increasing cultural and linguistic diversity in the world today call for a much broader view of literacy (Cummins, 2000).”

Selected References