Crossing Cultural Borders Through Ning

Allyson Eamer  
*University of Ontario Institute of Technology, CANADA*

Janette Hughes  
*University of Ontario Institute of Technology, CANADA*

Laura Jane Morrison  
*University of Ontario Institute of Technology, CANADA*

**Abstract**

The aim of this mixed methods research study was to examine the construction of adolescents’ bi-cultural identities through an exploration of their social practices on the social networking site, Ning. More specifically, we ask: (1) how are new Canadian and first-generation adolescents’ bi-cultural identities shaped and performed as they use multimedia and social networking tools in their classroom; and (2) how can social networking tools help students cross cultural barriers and build strong communities of practice. In this paper, we share the findings of this research that examines how seventy-seven 11-12 year old students explored, negotiated and presented their bi-cultural identities while using a social networking site with their peers and teachers, and how this process contributed to the creation of a strong community of practice.

**Keywords:** social media; social presence; multiliteracies; adolescents; identity; identities; digital literacies; Ning; pedagogy; mobile devices; social practices
INTRODUCTION

It is often said about Canada, that, except for First Nations people, everyone is an immigrant, the caveat being that some arrived earlier than others. Indeed Canada’s multiculturalism -- described by Canadian spoken word poet, Shane Koyczan (nd), as “an experiment going right for a change” -- is evident in the 2011 National Household Survey which found that one in five Canadians is an immigrant (Ministry of Industry, 2013). Baker (2001) suggests that diversity creates good citizens. Unlike assimilation, which he describes as subtractive, multiculturalism, he says, provides for multiple perspectives thereby increasing a society’s sensitivity and respect. Where there are multiple cultures and languages, there are bridges instead of boundaries (p. 403).

In 1988 Bill C-93 was passed into law in Canada’s House of Commons, calling for the creation of a ministry to be responsible for the preservation and enhancement of multiculturalism. Canadian identity would henceforth be defined by diversity and pluralism. Detractors worried that Canadians needed more than our diversity to define us as a nation and to bind us together. While generally endorsing the mosaic rather than the melting pot metaphor, many Canadians felt that immigrants should be obliged to do more than “arrive and proceed to add new cultural tiles to the mosaic” (Bibby, 2004, p. 228).

According to Frideres (2006) nearly two thirds of Canada’s immigrants live in its three largest cities: Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver. As one of these three 1st tier cities, Toronto has prided itself on its diversity. In 2011, 37.4% of Canada’s 6.8 million immigrants were living in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). These foreign-born individuals accounted for 46% of Toronto’s total population (Ministry of Industry, 2013).

It is no surprise then, that Toronto has been the foremost setting from which discontent with pluralism has emerged and been vocalized. In the spring of 2007, Canada’s most widely read daily newspaper, The Toronto Star, ran a series entitled “The Uneasy Mosaic” in which the challenges of Toronto’s cultural diversity were explored. Stories included strife within intermarriages, disregard for foreign credentials, and inter-generational
conflicts. That same year, Michael Adams (2007), author of *Unlikely Utopia: The Surprising Triumph of Canadian Pluralism*, maintained that in spite of popular ideas circulating about Canadians “losing their vaunted openness to newcomers” and about newcomers being “not so thrilled about Canada either” (3), Canadian multiculturalism was still a success story. He cited public opinion polls in which multiculturalism was named more frequently than hockey as a source of Canadian pride; and that 84% of immigrants claimed they would make the same decision again to come to Canada.

Francophones, however, in Quebec’s large cities such as Montreal, worried that immigrants would be absorbed into the Anglo culture, diminishing the status of the French language over time. Tensions have been evident recently in the controversy over the Quebec government’s plan to ban the Sikh turban and Muslim hijab in children’s soccer matches. The Quebec government is also hopeful about imposing a secular charter banning religious symbols in the public sector. These increasingly prevalent conflicts have inevitable ramifications for community relations and the general functioning of society (Knox, 2011).

The appeal of Toronto and the other 1st tier cities seems to be the opportunity to settle in well-established immigrant communities with all the social, commercial and institutional advantages that doing so affords. Of concern to some, though, are the boundary maintenance, ghettoization, isolation and conflict that often accompany the gradual creation of cultural enclaves (Doucet, 2004). A good place to start working toward mutual understanding and respect is the school system – where citizenship is already part of the curriculum, and where teachers have the power to foster inclusive communities. Canadian researchers, have long recognized the role of schools in cultural (re)production and have explored identity construction with immigrants from kindergarten all the way through to adult ESL classes (Toohey, 2000; Hughes & Eamer, 2012; Goldstein, 1997; Eamer, 2012; Norton-Pierce, 1995; Morgan, 1997).

Adolescents who are immigrants or the offspring of immigrants have a particularly challenging road to navigate. Developmental psychology theory asserts that adolescence is the time during which we create
identities separate from our parents through increased social interaction with peer groups (Erikson, 1968). Add to this already difficult developmental task, the challenge of identity navigation in a new culture and language, and the matter of identity becomes increasingly complex. For adolescents to begin exploring and sharing their cultural identities, they first need to navigate their beliefs and values according to two cultural scripts: that of the home and of the larger community. Garrison (2009) defines social presence as the “ability of participants to identify with the community, communicate purposefully in a trusting environment and develop interpersonal relationships by way of projecting their individual personalities” (p. 352). Teachers can employ appropriate instructional tools and take an active role in assisting students to develop a social presence. By incorporating a variety of media in the delivery of the curriculum objectives, teachers can facilitate the identity navigation and development process, which in turn facilitates the emergence of a positive sense of self, respect for peers, and a sense of place and agency in their community of practice (Wenger, 1998; 2000).

Using a mixed-methods approach this study investigated (1) how bi-cultural identities are shaped and performed by adolescent students through the use of multimedia and social networking tools both in and outside the classroom; and (2) how social networking tools can help students to cross cultural borders and build strong communities of practice. These issues were explored throughout a poetry unit in three grade six classrooms that included six poetic genres: acrostic, free verse, postcard, spoken word, limerick and found poetry. In the unit, the students analyzed sample poems and deconstructed the poetic devices and themes typical of each genre. They then created their own poems with the help of various digital tools, such as iMovie and Glogster.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In order to engage the students and promote an exploration of their bi-cultural identities, we employed the New London Group’s (1996)
multiliteracies pedagogy. Literacy in the digital age no longer involves only reading and writing, but also meaning-making with images, sound and movement (Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, & Leu, 2008; Gee, 2004; Kress, 2000, 2003; Toohey et al., 2012). We were eager to both respect and draw upon the students’ out-of-school literacies in order to draw them deeper into the project. Without their active participation and personal investment in highly engaging classroom activities, the poetry unit would have been significantly less facilitative in identity exploration and in building an inclusive classroom community. To that end, we infused the poetry unit with a variety of digital multimodal tools and created a virtual meeting space through a Ning. A Ning is a social networking site (SNS) that allows groups to create customized social networks for invited members of a specific community, each of whom can create a profile, email one another and contribute content. As Lotherington and Jenson (2011) explain, digital and multimodal communication is dynamic, allowing the user to enter texts in “new and exciting ways” (p. 227). Ng-A-Fook (2012) believes that SNSs are especially valuable tools for immigrants, and explains that for many, social networking has become “the new mediated apparatus for communicating and representing their hyphenated symbolic worlds as permanent residents and foreigners in a new country” (p. 93). Adding another layer to the rationale for using digital and multimodal tools, Nelson (2006) asserts that multimodal practices allow individuals to understand and express meaning in ways that do not rely solely on linguistic communication. We wanted students to be able to perform their identities, share their interests/values and interact with one another in low-stress/low-stakes exchanges. Studies by Rambe (2012) and Shih (2011) on the use of SNSs in the classroom, indicate that functions such as discussion forums constitute low-stress environments as they enable learners to overcome language and intercultural barriers.

The cognitive demands of real time self-expression before an audience are overwhelming for many students, and particularly so, for students using a language that is not their mother tongue. Thus the ability to communicate asynchronously via the Ning eliminated the stress and
reduced the stakes associated with synchronous communication.

SNSs also allow students to comment, click on ‘like’ and post videos or images to express themselves and communicate with peers. McCarthy (2012) reports that this kind of increased interaction fulfills students’ need for social support and connectivity and ultimately leads to a more positive and encouraging community of practice. Observations from various other studies indicate that supportive online interactions strengthen offline relations (Blais, Craig, Pepler, & Connolly, 2008; Desjarlais & Willoughby, 2010; Valkenburg & Peter, 2009). In our study, this increase in communication and sense of community was achieved through the Ning, and as a result, students were able to learn about their classmates without necessarily having to engage in direct written or verbal communication.

According to Lankshear and Knobel (2007), new literacies like SNSs, which rely on Web 2.0 interactivity, inherently require a mindset that emphasizes collaboration, participation and shared knowledge distribution. Furthermore, SNSs can develop collaborative learning environments through their structurally connectivist nature, likewise multimodal practices involved in multimedia production also often promote collaboration (Siemens, 2006). Thus our decision to use digital activities with students in this study provided the optimal environment for fostering an inclusive community wherein stereotypes and fears could not stand up to the reality of the intercultural exchanges.

As Allport (1954), Festinger (1954) and other early advocates of, what is sometimes called the bookkeeping model, explain: the more that individuals of different groups are in contact with one another, the more likely they are to encounter disconfirming information with respect to their prejudicial beliefs. Allport’s contact hypothesis also holds that people generally see themselves not only as individuals but also as part of an in-group. Therefore, in helping students develop bi-cultural identities, our goal was to make the borders which distinguish in-groups from out-groups, more fluid, thereby allowing the students to find common ground. In order for prejudice to be reduced, Allport (1954) argued that there are four conditions. The individuals involved in the inter-group
contact must 1) have equal status, 2) have common goals; 3) be willing to engage in intergroup cooperation; and 4) be provided with support from some form of authority. These requirements were all met in this research project since the technologies and the project-based approach enabled all participants to claim some authority with respect to the learning process in the classroom. This situated the students as equals in a common task and required them to engage in social exchanges (acts of cooperation) as they reflected on one another’s self-expression through the various poetry genres. Meanwhile the presence of the teachers provided the necessary authority to ensure that inter-group contact was positive. Indeed, Hasler and Amichai-Hamburger (2013) have found that the Internet is “uniquely suited to set out these conditions, and may even be more effective than face to face interaction in putting Allport’s contact hypothesis into practice” (p. 223).

It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the problematized language associated with transnational identity. We approached this research with the postmodern conceptualization of identity as multi-faceted and dynamic, and did not attempt to de-conflate the overlapping terminology in discourse involving multiple cultural identifications. Therefore we chose to use words such as “hybrid”, “bi-cultural” and “hyphenated” interchangeably. Each of these words served our purpose in exploring how young adolescents with immigrant narratives experienced a growing awareness that a binary approach to identity (us and the other) will not allow them to participate in a pluralist culture. We observed and documented this awareness emerge in Bhabha’s (1994) third space through the use of digital media to perform self-expression in an online forum.

THE STUDY

Participants

The study was conducted in three grade six classes in a large inner city school in Toronto, Canada. Of the 77 students who participated in the
study, more than 90% were immigrants themselves or born to immigrants. The students had varying degrees of computer literacy, but none had experience with Ning, the SNS used in this study. Ten of the 77 students received ESL support, either within their own classrooms or on a withdrawal basis. These ten English language learners (ELLs) consisted of six girls and four boys at various stages of proficiency in English ranging from high-beginner (stage 2) to high-intermediate (stage 3) according to the Stages of Second Language Acquisition outlined by Ontario’s Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education, 2001). Their countries of origin were Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq and China. While the vast majority of all 77 of the student participants embodied migration narratives, we felt that the 10 students who were still acquiring English would be the best sources of information about navigating through two cultures. As George Dei reminds us in a webcast presented on the Ministry of Education’s Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat website (http://www.curriculum.org/k-12/en/videos/ george-dei):

The students, when they come to school, they come with their bodies, and their bodies are raced, they are classed, they are gendered, they are sexualized. There are questions of ability and disability. The students do not leave these bodies at home. They bring them to school.

Four teachers were also participants in the research, three of whom were the classroom teachers for the three grade 6 classes. The three classroom teachers, referred to as Teachers A, B and C in the findings were all experienced teachers who, in conjunction with the researchers, delivered a poetry unit as part of the Language Arts curriculum in their classes. The fourth teacher was the ESL teacher who supported the ten ESL students both within their own classrooms as well as within a separate classroom where English language skills were taught more formally. He was also an experienced teacher and is referred to as Teacher D in the findings. All of the four teachers described themselves as being somewhat computer literate.
Environment

The study was conducted in a blended learning environment that included the three grade six classrooms and the online SNS, Ning. The students used MacBook laptop computers, various digital programs and the Ning to learn about poetry and to complete their assignments. During the entirety of the project, the students stayed connected on the Ning both in and out of the classroom, creating, updating and managing their profile pages, providing and receiving homework help, uploading their school work, providing peer-feedback, creating special interest groups and holding discussions. The students also used the Ning to post videos, gifs, music and photos, and to post status updates and comments/likes on their peers’ walls.

METHODOLOGY

The study used a mixed methods approach to collect data in three grade six classrooms in a highly diverse Toronto school. Both purposive and convenience sampling techniques were utilized in determining the grade level and the school in which the research would be conducted. Qualitative methods included case studies, interviews, video recordings of students presenting their work, and field notes taken over a three-month period during which researchers spent approximately 75 hours in each of the three classes. A pre-and post-instruction survey provided the quantitative data. Students and their parent/guardian(s) were given the opportunity to opt-out before the project began or at any point during the project.

In-depth, qualitative case study methods (Stake, 2000) were used to explore the first research question: how are students’ bi-cultural identities influenced and performed as they use multimedia and social networking tools in their classroom? Bruce (2009, p. 302) asserts that case studies “provide the best articulation of adolescents’ media literacy processes.” Throughout the lessons and activities that comprised the poetry unit, the students responded to assignments requiring them to explore their...
identities using digital multimedia tools and the Ning. The emerging themes in student multimodal texts were coded and analyzed for interpretation using standard grounded theory methods as well as a framework of semiotic meta-functions in which design and production are considered as representational, interactive and textual (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001; Jewitt, 2008; Burn, 2008). Because of the complex blending of multimodal data, the digital visual literacy analysis method of developing a “pictorial and textual representation of those elements” was also used (Hull & Katz, 2006, p. 41); that is, the juxtaposition of columns of the written text, the images from digital texts, and data from interviews, field notes and video recordings to facilitate the “qualitative analysis of patterns” (p. 41). Our analysis focused on the various modes of expression and how these functioned in concert to create meaning. Finally, we relied on thematic coding (Miles, 1994) and critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995) when examining the interview transcripts of the ten ELLs. Themes were compared across different cases to identify patterns in the students’ responses (Black, 2007). The data were then read and coded for major themes and sub-themes across the sources, and the codes were revised and expanded as more themes emerged.

In keeping with Driscoll and Greg’s (2010) assertion that online culture enables a particular kind of intimacy, we also considered the student work through the lens of virtual ethnography. Given that the ethnographer’s field/research site can now consist of both physical and online space, this study reflects a broader interpretation of ethnography that includes multimodal and network ethnographies. Furthermore the interactions between students on the Ning, including comments on the poems written by peers, were considered to have resulted, at least in part, from the affordance provided by the digital medium.

Ten ESL students were drawn from amongst the three classrooms to participate in post-project interviews. Purposive sampling was used to determine that the ESL students would be interviewed, since this sample focused on a narrow segment of learners (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). All four teachers were also interviewed. The purpose of the interviews was to better understand how students felt about the digital space.
available to them through the Ning. Interview questions were aimed at
determining if the students felt that the Ning had helped them to feel
more connected to their classmates, to explore and present a bi-cultural
identity, and to develop their language and literacy skills.

All participants across the three classrooms participated in secure,
amonymous pre- and post-project electronic surveys. In the pre-unit
survey, questions were asked to determine how students were currently
using digital tools in their out-of-school lives and to gauge the extent of
their experience with web-based tools such as social networking sites.
The post-surveys used the same questions to determine any shifts in
attitudes towards bi-cultural identity development. Survey data
contributed to the methodological triangulation, which allowed
researchers to compare students’ self-identification via a variety of means
of self-expression. The quantifiable survey data combined with the
researchers’ field notes, the transcribed student interviews, and the visual
and content analyses of the students’ digital texts enabled the researchers
to track the development of students’ identities and the creation of an
inclusive community of practice.

**The Digital Activities and Ning**

Through a unit on poetry, which included a close study of acrostic, free
verse, postcard, limerick, spoken word and found poetry, students
explored the concept of what it means to develop a bi-cultural identity. In
each of the six genres, students studied various poems and responded to
them, analyzing their poetic devices and identity themes. The students
also participated in informal think-pair-shares, whole-class discussions
and individual reflections that were posted to the Ning for others to read.
At the end of each genre, students created their own digital poems and
shared these on the Ning.

**Acrostic poetry**

Students wrote an acrostic poem using their names and the online
acrostic poetry tool on the www.readwritethink.org website. They then
created a personalized barcode in Microsoft Word using line shapes and
significant/meaningful numbers that represent them as individuals. A profile picture was taken with the Photo Booth tool and all three elements were combined in Word to make a personal ‘About Me’ poster. The poster was uploaded to Ning to share with peers.

![Sample acrostic poem](image)

**Figure 1. Sample acrostic poem**

**Free verse**

In a table in Microsoft Word, the students brainstormed ideas for a free verse poem under the following headings: image, light, sound, question, feeling and repetition. They then put their ideas together using the online quick-writing program www.writeordie.com which, when users cease to write for a short period of time, provides a warning and then begins to delete words. The pressure encourages the user to write and is intended to discourage mental blocks. Students uploaded their poems to the Ning and were required to read and comment on some of their peers’ poems, providing positive and/or constructive feedback.
Postcard poetry
Students were first provided examples of postcard poetry and prompted with questions to deconstruct the elements – for example, what is similar about the voice in each example, what is common about the text placement/layout, what do you notice about the length restrictions and visuals and how might these add to the poetry? The students then created their own postcard poems that included both visuals and text, using the online poster-making program www.Glogster.com and responding to the writing prompt, “Who I want to be in middle school.” As a final step, they posted their poems to the Ning and commented on one another’s work.
Spoken word

Students were shown a video, accessible through YouTube, of Shane Koyczan performing his spoken word poem about Canada entitled, We are More (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zsq68qRexFc). Afterwards, they collectively deconstructed the poetic elements involved in Koyczan’s poem and in the genre as a whole, to compare their own conceptualizations of Canadian identity with that of the poet and each other. The students then created their own spoken word poems using iMovie, responding to the prompt, “Who I Am.” Here, students explored their dual national identities as part of the process of building their bi-cultural/hyphenated...
identities. They then uploaded their movies to YouTube, shared the links on Ning and commented on each other’s poems.

Figure 4. A freeze-frame from the video of a spoken word poem

My limerick

There was a good boy named Mike,
Who kicked the ball for a strike,
The shot was a miss,
So he clenched up his fist,
And rode himself home with his bike

Figure 5. Sample limerick poem
Limerick

Students were provided with four examples of limericks, which were read aloud by volunteers. As a class, the limerick structure was analyzed for content, form, rhyme scheme and other poetic devices. The students were then asked to think of a defining, yet humorous moment in their lives, and challenged to take that moment and explain it in the limerick format. Students then shared their final products on the Ning and they read and commented on some of their peers’ poems. Students were also asked to reflect on the Ning about why this was a defining moment for them and how it might have played a part in shaping their identity.

Found poetry

Students were first shown an example of a found poem with words taken from magazine and TV advertisements. They then created their own found poems using the words and phrases located within their classrooms, followed by a class discussion regarding how people’s environments can shape or influence their personalities/identities. Students then wrote another found poem using their status updates, comments and discussions from the Ning and reflected on the personalities they portray based on what they publish. As with the other

![Sample found poem](image)

*Figure 6. Sample found poem*
poems, the students uploaded their work to the Ning and commented on poems written by their peers.

**RESULTS**

Four main insights were gained regarding the integration of digital literacies, and especially the use of a SNS in the classroom: (1) the students were readily engaged in the project in spite of the complexity of the subject matter; (2) the digital tools successfully facilitated low-stakes sharing, so the students felt free to post about their cultural heritage, values and interests; (3) the tools facilitated the students in exploring and developing their emerging identities through their ability to circumvent language; and finally, (4) the tools facilitated the crossing of cultural borders to create a sense of belonging in an inclusive and collaborative community of practice.

Teacher A asserted that the digital tools played a major role in engaging the students and keeping them interested.

> I think they really enjoyed tapping into a lot of different creative areas that they might not normally be able to do and, so, I think that it just helped motivate them, interest them and hook them. And it reached kids, some kids in a way they may not have normally been reached.

It was clear the students were very engaged in the project given the rapid speed with which they claimed the Ning as their own space. Here they could exercise agency and control – both important elements in the process of becoming an autonomous individual and developing one’s sense of self (Erikson, 1968). As one girl who had emigrated from Iraq said, “We could add pictures, we could write, we could… we could add videos, we could add anything and I liked Ning because we could chat with friends and I got more comfortable talking to them.” This sense of agency may even have contributed to increased English language skills since interviews with the ten students in the ESL program
overwhelmingly indicated that the chat feature within Ning and the ability to post poems and respond to the poems of their peers were most helpful in exposing them to new vocabulary, social practices and ways of thinking.

The use of digital tools, according to Teacher C enabled “school and home [to] come together more.” Teacher B noted that the Ning “allowed them a place that they could – almost like a bulletin board – that they [could] post their work and they [could] comment on their work and it made it not as onerous on everybody.” As Alvermann (2010) states, there is a strong relationship between literacy practices and identity. They “provide an arena for constructing and performing identities, and youth identity production in SNSs [Social Networking Sites] is a pertinent example of this” (p. 60).

The digital media enabled students to easily share details about their cultural heritage, values and life experiences, opening lines of communication and bringing an acute awareness to the diversity in the class. For example, one boy from Afghanistan wrote about witnessing the devastation of war in his country before coming to Canada. A fellow student had this to stay about his classmate’s experience of war: “Before he had shared this poem on the Ning, I never realized how much hurt he got. There was a poem called ‘Where I’ve Come From’ and he wrote about the things that happened in Afghanistan, and he said that there’s a lot of war and terror…” All students were encouraged to write about their cultural heritage in their poetry, share it on the Ning and leave positive comments for some of their peers. As a result, every student’s experience was validated, not only by the teacher but also by their peers. Said Teacher B, “They appreciated being valued for who they were and what they brought to [the project].” This is one of the four requirements in Allport’s (1954) contact hypothesis. Teacher B went on to describe what the students learned about each other:

…they realized I think that they were different, that they had different identities and that was ok, but also that it was kind of like they were the same. There was a lot of things that were the same about them so I think
they became more empathetic towards each other because a lot of the students... wrote about war and the atrocities that they had seen in their homeland... I don’t think they realized what that person was carrying with them and that there was more to them sometimes than just what they were seeing in the person who sat across from them.

The different modes of communicating seemed to encourage the students to express emotions and experiences that had been previously unshared. Teacher C explained, “I found out from one student in particular the hardships that he had gone through in his home country... I didn’t understand until he wrote the poem how hard it was for him.” Similarly, one of the students who was not in the ESL program volunteered the following observation: “…some people I never knew that they were so deep-thinking.” This online forum provided the students with a new meeting space, where they felt comfortable and free to share things they may not have otherwise chosen to share with their peers and teachers during regular face-to-face class time.

Joinson (2001) and Tidwell and Walther (2002) found that online interactions are important tools in the process of trust-building, as there is a higher likelihood that individuals will reveal more about themselves online than face-to-face. As one student explained, “it’s just like you feel you need to talk to more people when you’re online because you just feel an urge to do it.” It is possible that without the multimodal communication tools which created the low-stress/low-stakes environment, students wouldn’t have opened themselves up to their peers to the same degree. The digital tools provided a sense of control with respect to one’s own stories, as underscored in the words of a non-ESL student who had experienced the effects of war first-hand. He felt that one could “share [his/her story] but without giving up the whole part of it—whatever you’re talking about. It’s, like, out there, but not fully.”

Thirdly, the digital tools opened a new space for the students to start exploring their emerging bi-cultural identities. In informal class discussions, many students self-identified as neither exclusively
Canadian nor as a hyphenated Canadian, but rather as a member of the culture associated with their countries of origin. An Iraqi-born student who had Canadian citizenship communicated his identity as Iraqi, not Canadian or Iraqi-Canadian. This was especially evident in the students’ digital work, at the project’s outset. As Teacher B explained:

...a lot of the work— I was surprised at how it was, you know, flags of their countries, images of their countries, like, that's who they see themselves as. Even if they were born here just shortly after their parents arrived, they still see themselves as that other cultural group and when you think about it that makes sense because they’re...that's where they are most of the time. I mean we only have them 5 hours a day for 194 days of the year so it makes sense but you don’t realize how strong their identity or their connection with that culture is and it kind of maybe explains some of the things that you see.

This affirmed our beliefs that schools could play a more active role in helping immigrant students negotiate a hybrid identity in their new homeland. Successful development of a bi-cultural identity has been described using a number of different models (Hutnik, 1986 and Olshtain & Kotik, 2000 for example), but each one strives to avoid or minimize the host of social problems (including the inter-group, inter-generational and interpersonal conflicts) that result from an individual’s inability to navigate between different identities in different contexts. This important skill – navigating and negotiating one’s identity is articulated below by Teacher A:

This unit was, I think, very effective in having the students become very aware of their identities. I saw more so towards the end where they were becoming more comfortable, more open about where they came from, and how coming to Canada, for example, was such a juxtaposition from where they came. And it… they really opened up… And, it’s allowed them to realize that it’s ok to be that and to be Canadian and to be the mix that’s in the middle of whatever that is and I think they valued that.
The emergence of one’s awareness of multiple group memberships is witnessed in the words of an Afghani boy who noted “First I thought I only had one identity, but then when we did the poems and stuff, I feel like I’m more than one person.” Interestingly, this revelation occurred for many of the students through both the poetry writing activities and the reflective communication they engaged in with their peers on the Ning. A girl who had only recently arrived from Pakistan reported learning more about her Canadian identity through this increase in social contact saying: “I learned by my friends because they told me a lot about Canada and different types of things.” Having the space to connect and reflect seemed to be key in helping students explore and conceptualize a Canadian identity. One girl articulated her new understanding of the possibility of a hybridized identity like this: “I think I learned that there’s quite a difference between two cultures and then also like you could also blend them together…”

Finally, the digital tools facilitated the crossing of cultural boundaries. The research team, teachers and students all witnessed the creation of a more inclusive learning community as a result of the collaboration required to learn to use the digital tools. This collaboration also extended to their actual assignments since students were required to post and comment on one another’s poems. This collaboration aligns with two of the other elements in Allport’s (1954) contact hypothesis, whereby inter-group cohesion arises when cooperating and working toward a common goal. Said Teacher B, “They were very willing to help each other and to ask each other for help…I found them going to each other more.” Teacher C agreed with this change in behavior: “I could take my hands off. [T]here’s a kid who can understand and [that] kid explains it to the other kid and the kid accepts it.” The classroom transformed into a place where the students were “learners who [were] teaching themselves and [were] taking responsibility for that,” which made the classroom a democratic place for teaching and learning. One Canadian-born student explained it like this: “I think having the social network in our class kind of built a bond between some of us, like, some people talked to people that they didn’t think they would usually talk to. You know, make new
friends and stuff.” This was facilitated not only by the formal interaction the students were required to have in the classroom and online when commenting on their peers’ work, but also through the informal chat sessions the students had on the Ning while at home. Effectively, the Ning extended the time the students were able to come into contact with one another. In the past, students who only had contact with each other in school, were now able, through the Ning, to continue their conversations from home. This allowed for their country-of-origin identities to overlap with their school identities, with school being the site at which Canadian culture is enacted and transmitted. As one student said, “I think that we kind of got closer to classmates and stuff because you’re not just with them in the class but also at home on Ning.”

The low-stress online activity translated into an increase in face-to-face activity. One girl, originally from Iraq described feeling more comfortable talking to her peers in person after the project “…because we talked on Ning and then sometimes we talk in person.” She also explained, “I didn’t talk to Sarah before, but then we talk[ed] on Ning and we talk right now. Now we are friends.” Teacher B observed this about a new Canadian in her colleague’s class:

…there’s a little boy in Teacher C’s class who’s new to Canada. He’s been struggling as a newcomer trying to find the language, trying to find friends and on Ning, he was in all— every chat wanting to talk to people and people are now including him in their games, in the activities in the classroom and starting conversations with him so he’s now smiling more and he’s become more comfortable in the classroom.

**DISCUSSION**

Important to note is that the positive interactions that transpired between the students, along with the collaborative community of practice that emerged as a result, was possible due to the controlled and deliberative activities in which the students were required to engage. This aligns with
the last element in Allport’s (1954) contact hypothesis theory, which requires an authority to support the process of intercultural exchange. In this study, the teachers acted as the authority, directing and facilitating this process. They established ground rules for online communication and discussed online ‘netiquette’ which laid the foundation for respectful and effective peer collaboration. As Teacher D said:

I think the teacher initially initiated it and encouraged it and then they took off with it, uh, because they could see that no one was biting anybody and was getting along here, so let’s just play this game ’cause it’s cool. I think that it was encouraged because they may be reluctant and the kid who’s receiving the help would be even more reluctant to accept the help so…the more encouragement you give to this process the better everybody feels about it and there’s no harm done by somebody you’ve never talked to or hate, actually hate, coming over to help you with something. All of a sudden the…this emotion you felt from a stranger dissolves. So I saw that happen.

One of the non-ESL students echoed with, “Teacher is always watching you. You have to use appropriate language.”

CONCLUSION

From the results of this study, it is clear that employing a multiliteracies pedagogy was instrumental in sufficiently engaging the students so that the necessary climate of an inclusive learning community could be established, wherein bi-cultural identities could be explored and developed. The digital tools were also essential in facilitating low-stakes/low-stress exchanges between students of differing cultural backgrounds, as they contained multimodal communication functions that extended beyond traditional verbal and written communication. The tools greatly aided the students in the exploration and development of their bi-cultural identities and helped to create a cohesive community of
practice in the classroom where students not only tolerated one another, but were actively involved in collaboration.

The study demonstrates that bi-cultural identities are co-constructed, and that this can take place in both the online and physical world. As adolescents interact with one another and become exposed to new ideas, cultures and values, they begin to renegotiate their group memberships, allowing for multiple overlaps and identity claims. When a safe common space is created (via the Ning in this case) cultural borders become more porous, which establishes the climate for the exploration of new (hybrid/bi-cultural) identities. Post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha (1994) recognizes the value of moving away from singular conceptualizations of national and cultural identification. By undertaking the experience of migration, Bhabha would say, one agrees to inhabit the in-between spaces, the grey areas and the border terrain. In doing so, the comfort of knowing exactly where one belongs is lost, but the ability to acquire new allegiances and new identifiers (without having to give up old ones) is gained.

Another insight gleaned from this study is that when adolescents from seemingly disparate backgrounds are given a common goal and asked to collaborate, for example, in learning to use new technology or in peer-editing one another’s work, the potential to build a cohesive community arises. However, during the study it was also clear that in order to bring about these positive outcomes, it is necessary for an authority to be present in order to ensure the interactions remain positive. This is done through deliberative community building activities and intervention/conflict resolution when necessary.

In moving forward, teachers must willingly accept their roles as models and overseers of positive online communication so that students are well prepared for online interactions and collaborations which will increasingly become the source of their sense of community and belonging. Teachers must then recognize that they can capitalize on both the face-to-face, as well as the virtual, learning communities created with and for their students as the space wherein identity negotiation for immigrant adolescents can occur. Teachers can assist in the development of this space through overt and explicit curriculum objectives.
REFERENCES


Desjarlais, M., & Willoughby, T. (2010). A longitudinal study of the relation between adolescent boys and girls’ computer use with friends and friendship quality: Support for the social compensation or the rich-get-richer hypothesis? *Computers in


*Allyson Eamer* is a sociolinguist who studies the reflexive relationships between language use, identity, belonging, agency and transnationalism. She teaches in the Faculty of Education at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology. Her research includes language shift and maintenance over multiple generations of immigrant families in Canada, as well as the sociocultural impacts of linguicide on indigenous peoples around the globe. In 2013, she was made a Fellow of the Nantucket Project for her work on documenting the state of the art use of technology for revitalizing endangered languages.

E-mail: Allyson.Eamer@UOIT.ca
Telephone: +1-905-721-8668 ext. 3821
Postal Address: 11 Simcoe Street North, Oshawa, ON, Canada, L1H 7L7

*Janette Hughes* is an associate professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology. Her research focuses on digital media in writing, performance, and understanding. In 2011 she was awarded the Early Researchers Award by the Ontario Ministry of Research and Innovation and she is the 2013 recipient of the National Technology Leadership Initiative sponsored by the Conference on English Education Commission and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE).
Laura Morrison is an MA Candidate in the Faculty of Education at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology. Laura’s areas of research currently include critical digital literacies pedagogy, and adolescent literacy and identity development. Her work on the role of Facebook and the development of adolescents’ literacy skills and identity was published in March 2013 in the International Journal of Social Media and Interactive Learning. She recently presented this work at the 2013 Poetic Inquiry conference in Montreal, Canada.