

# ***Beyond Pen Pals:*** Shared Readings, Internet Tools, and Classrooms Overseas

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Danielle Cardenas begins the school day in North Carolina by reading aloud to her third grade class from *Our Children Can Soar: A Celebration of Rosa, Barack, and Pioneers of Change*. Her students are attentive, leaning forward to see the illustrations of the picture book, shooting hands high to respond to questions and setting the room abuzz when she asks them to turn and talk to a partner about a passage.

On the other side of the globe in South Africa, Louise Duffet is also reading aloud a biography, *Nelson Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom*. These third graders are discussing the leadership qualities shown by their former president and anti-apartheid leader. They list their thoughts on an “anchor chart” about “Heroes of South Africa.”

It is no accident that, on the same day, these teachers have both chosen to use books about national heroes that tie literature to the social studies, specifically the study of civil rights in their respective nations. Soon their students would be discussing these books with each other during a brief, live videoconference via the Internet.

Global 2.0 is a project that was developed and designed by university faculty, which connects these classes across thousands of miles through a shared curriculum. This project was developed to foster meaningful partnerships between the university, local schools, and schools around the globe. This ongoing program serves local teachers who are interested in strengthening their social studies curriculum. Our Global 2.0 program pairs elementary classrooms, so, together with their teachers, students can explore identity and culture and engage in conversations on a wide range of issues. Central to this experience is the use of a variety of texts including fiction, nonfiction, and digital literacy formats.

## **Project Outline**

We named our cross-cultural exchange project “Global 2.0” to reflect our goal of facilitating global education through the use of Web 2.0 tools. We used Schoology ([www.schoology.com](http://www.schoology.com)), a secure on-line course management platform at which allows classrooms to communicate and share assignments and student work. We also used Skype (via [www.Skype.com](http://www.Skype.com)), which provides face-to-face, real-time video communication across

the globe at low cost.

The unit of study that is the focus of this article centers on issues of identity, culture, and national stereotypes. The lessons that we created (six one hour lessons to be taught over the course of five weeks) can be adjusted to be developmentally appropriate and consistent with national, state, and district standards and objectives. Every other week, a 30-minute lesson was devoted to communication with a classroom in another country via Skype.

The university faculty who facilitated this exchange reached out to teachers in other nations with whom they had a personal connection. Participants included teachers in North Carolina, Ireland, and South Africa. During a professional development session (via Skype, lasting about 30 minutes) we explained to the elementary teachers the Global 2.0 framework of lessons, resources, and teacher workshops to be implemented in the first weeks of the undertaking. We introduced the teachers to the features of Schoology, which would serve as their primary source of communication for the virtual exchange, and invited them to exchange e-mails with each other through that website.

In this project, the main resources were provided by the university faculty to participating classrooms, but it’s increasingly practical for teachers to develop their own partnerships, whether through personal connections or institutionally supported programs (a few of which are noted at the end of this article). The lessons and key resources (in an American third grade classroom) are summarized in the chart (page 17).

In addition to discussing topics with students in other nations via Skype, children were able to view each other’s work as posted to Schoology. Classes logged on to view how students in the partner school responded to each activity. Partner teachers often coordinated with one another (through Skype) as they planned lessons. Skype also enabled students to “meet each

## A Sample Global 2.0 Unit of Study (Summary, for Grade 3)

Weeks	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5
<b>Topic of Lesson</b>	Identity	Culture	Heroes	Civil Rights (History)	Artifact Exchange (Culture)
<b>Key Teaching Resource (Book)</b>	<i>The Name Jar</i>	<i>Whoever You Are</i>	<i>What It Takes to Be a Hero</i>	<i>Our Children Can Soar; Long Walk to Freedom</i>	<i>The Matchbox Diary</i>
<b>Key Question</b> A query to spark the class-to-class international Skype discussion	What character traits identify you as a person?	What is culture? What is our culture?	Who are our heroes?	What personal qualities do leaders have?	What do you own that you are eager to share with friends?
<b>Student Product</b> Product or evidence of learning to share with students overseas (and for assessment)	Create a circle map describing yourself to someone who does not know you.	Create a class circle map of defining features of your culture.	Write a paragraph and illustrate it.	Write down the top three character traits that you want to strive for as you grow.	Write a caption for one of the items in the package.

other” onscreen, ask and answer questions about culture, and share stories and local traditions, as well as comment on the shared activities.

Students loved Skyping their new and distant friends, fascinated by actually “seeing” and “meeting” one another. In one partnership between kindergarten classrooms, one in North Carolina and one in Ireland, students immediately noticed salient differences, for example, the all-white look of the children in the Irish schools, the absence of uniforms in the American classrooms, and the sounds of different accents in their shared language, English. The interactions created a connection among the elementary classrooms and prompted new questions, which, in turn, provided teachers with new ideas for sharing lessons. Throughout the year, depending on teacher preferences and interests, communication expanded to include Twitter, blogs, and screencasts, during which students would ask or answer questions during a pre-recorded video. Students received birthday greetings from students in their partner nation, wrote about the theme of bullying in the context of a shared reading (the book *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*), and sent videos of walking tours of their schools.

At the conclusion of the project, teachers facilitated an “artifact exchange,” in which each class created a “culture pack” of items representing their culture and sent it to the partner classroom.<sup>1</sup> (See the **Pullout**.) One culture pack included a class photo portrait, a photo of the school, a baseball, a national flag, some currency, menus from favorite restaurants, favorite children’s novels, and favorite songs on a CD. Students wrote an explanation (or caption) for each artifact. Once the package arrived, students at the receiving end analyzed the artifacts

and then asked additional questions about the meaning of an item or why it was chosen.

Central to the Global 2.0 experience was the use of literature to build knowledge about the partner nation. Several forms of literature were emphasized as students explored their own identity, investigated the culture of the partner classroom, and researched topics of mutual interest connected to established classroom curriculum. The use of informational text, paired texts, and new literacies (including the use of Google Earth, other on-line maps, and apps), are described here in the context of the project.

### A Range of Reading Materials

Using nonfiction in primary grades is not only a wise choice for preparing students for the future, it may be the best way to win the hearts and minds of the many students who prefer to read nonfiction over fiction. In the past, fiction has been used more frequently in elementary grades with the goal of engaging students through narrative and developing a love of reading and literature.<sup>2</sup> However, many children are better motivated by a wider range of genres, including nonfiction. In fact, literacy studies consistently note gender differences in text preferences, with boys more frequently choosing nonfiction genres for independent reading, while girls tend to be more varied in self-selections of text, also including nonfiction choices as often as fiction.<sup>3</sup> Teachers sought to engage, motivate, and develop an appreciation for literature, both fiction and nonfiction, using a variety of digital formats, as a means of differentiating by interest for many students.

## Using Informational Text

Right from the start, all the teachers were motivated to gather information about their new partners' countries, and share that knowledge with their students. For example, Ms. Allen who teaches in Burlington, North Carolina, said, "I don't know much about the country, myself. I need to read about Ireland!" A search of school and local libraries provided teachers with stacks of informational texts. One such book, *This is Ireland* by Miroslav Sasek, provided Ms. Allen and her students with a peek inside the world of their new friends across the Atlantic. The children were enthralled by the illustrations of the lush green countryside, landmark churches, and quaint villages. "It looks like a fairy tale," noted Erin, "I wish I could visit them." Mrs. Allen responded by asking students to think of what they might want to share about their own community or state. She used a Venn diagram to begin a lesson in comparing and contrasting, labeling one space "Carolina Blue" and another "Emerald Green Ireland." Different countries can be beautiful in their own way—each represented by a different color. Students wanted to add more items to the diagram, and discovered (for example) that both places have farms and small cities, yet the buildings often look quite different. At the conclusion of the activity, Sophie reflected again, "We both live in beautiful places."

During a similar lesson in the third grade, Ms. Cardenas introduced the country of South Africa by reading a book with great illustrations, *South Africa* (Countries of the World) by Michael Dahl. This book sparked students' interest and excitement.

Some books explored more general comparisons of life experiences and cultures in different countries. The *Around the World* books, a series by Ann Morris, were especially popular with the kindergarten students, as they compare familiar subjects (such as families, homes, hats, and bread) across many nations. Conversations about hats, for example, led student to formulate questions about weather and fashion: "Do you have snow there?" "Do you wear clothes with sports teams' names?" They prepared to ask these questions during the next Skype conversation with foreign students.

Teachers usually presented the informational texts by reading them aloud to the whole class, during brief, daily readings. They thoughtfully combined social studies content (such as the study of culture, geography, and historical figures) during literacy blocks, which allowed students to practice reading and comprehending informational texts even as they gained knowledge about the world beyond their borders. The particular interests of the students and teachers led classes in many directions in their exploration of another culture, but sports, famous landmarks, historic figures, and holidays were favorite topics.

Tesha, a third grader in North Carolina, summarized her studies, saying, "Well, they're kids like us, so they're the same in a lot of ways. But, mostly, I like to find the differences—what they eat, what kind of games they play, what kind of music they listen to. Why we don't do those same things?" As Tesha's remarks revealed, the children were interested in factual details and topics; informational texts turned out to be invaluable sources

for building knowledge about the lives and cultures of peers in the paired nation.

## Using Paired Texts to Explore Culture

The project also required children to consider how they wanted to represent themselves to their new friends. Students' eagerness to share these explorations was obvious in their conversations in the classroom, "Did they see our books?" "What do you think they said about them?" "Will they write stories, too?" asked Jamal, a third grader. Literacy was at the core of their investigations of their own culture, identity, family, community, and nation, setting the stage for comparing elements of culture in different ways, using paired texts.

The term "paired texts" refers to the thoughtful and intentional use of complementary fiction and nonfiction to address a topic or theme. Paired texts offer the advantages of building on and repeating new vocabulary across multiple books, differentiating across genre for motivation and engagement, and providing examples in context for fact-based information.<sup>4</sup> Nonfiction relayed factual information, while fiction selections highlighted elements of culture. For example, on St. Patrick's Day, teachers paired historical information about Ireland with engaging folk tales to yield rich discussions about shared values.

Mrs. Henry, a North Carolina kindergarten teacher, read *The Night Before St. Patrick's Day* by Natasha Wing to her class, a story in which children set traps to catch cunning leprechauns.

"I wonder if the leprechauns make a mess in the classrooms in Ireland, like they do here," said Jaylen (recalling a "classroom mystery" described below). "And do they leave a pot of golden coins for the kids?" asked Savannah. Their teacher followed up by reading the traditional story of St. Patrick as told in *Patrick: Patron Saint of Ireland* by Tomie dePaola. Students gained a deeper understanding of the historical traditions of the holiday, hearing new vocabulary once again, but in a new context. During the next Skype session, students inquired further about celebrations of St. Patrick's Day in different countries. Irish students were surprised to learn that "American" leprechauns tended to misbehave by leaving green footprints throughout the classroom, scattering papers and glitter throughout. In Ireland, leprechauns are thought to bring good luck, but had not been known to "visit any nearby classrooms."

Paired texts also engendered rich writing assignments that mirrored the genres in use. *Tis for Tar Heel: A North Carolina Alphabet* by Carol Crane is a perfect jumping off point for developing student informational alphabet books about their schools. Upon receiving a copy of the book in the culture pack, students in Ms. Duffet's third grade class in South Africa created an similar ABC book, which included local landmarks, such as A is for amphitheater (A being the shape of The City Bowl, an area surrounded by famous mountainous landmarks), and B is for Bloubergstrand Beach (a resort area north of Cape Town).

In contrast, the fictional tale, *Meerkat Mail* by Emily Gravett, a delightful story from the Kalahari Desert about visiting family, offered inspiration for writing and illustrating postcards showing

national monuments. In a later geography lesson, students would attach these post cards to their respective locations on a map. Identifying local landmarks reinforced geographical knowledge, while literacy skills were practiced when students wrote stories in the same style or format as the story in a published book. Teachers were able to assess both writing skills and geographic knowledge in the final products.

### New Literacies in Global 2.0

Literacy, as we know it, is also being changed by the evolution of “new literacies,” broadly defined as language and text that must be comprehended using tools and technologies associated with digital formats.<sup>5</sup> New literacies are most often associated with an ever-changing menu of new formats such as wikis, blogs,

social media, e-zines, and interactive apps. In Global 2.0, students used iPad apps to research geographic and demographic information; then they completed assignments by creating new works, sharing their creations, and commenting on assignments through the Schoology website.<sup>6</sup>

New literacies are not flat-screen versions of traditional books; they require competencies that blend technology and literacy skills. The ability to fully use and learn from new media must be complemented by the knowledge and skills of reading, researching, evaluating, and analyzing content as presented by a variety of visual, auditory, and written formats. This new learning environment will continue to evolve as students move through their school years. A foundation in 21st century literacy skills will provide young children with opportunities to explore

## Recommended Books

*A Life Like Mine: How Children Around the World Live.* New York: DK Publishing, 2002.

Choi, Yangsook. *The Name Jar.* New York: Dragonfly Books, 2003.

Cook, Michelle, and Cozbi A. Cabrera. *Our Children Can Soar: A Celebration of Rosa, Barack, and the Pioneers of Change.* New York: Bloomsbury, 2009.

Crane, Carol, and Gary Palmer. *T is for Tar Heel: A North Carolina Alphabet.* Chelsea, MI: Sleeping Bear Press, 2005.

Dahl, Michael. *South Africa: Countries Around the World.* Minneapolis, MN: Capstone Press, 1999.

dePaola, Tomie. *Patrick, Patron Saint of Ireland.* New York: Holiday House, 2013.

Fox, Mem. *Whoever You Are.* Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2006.

Gravett, Emily. *Meerkat Mail.* New York: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2007.

Kinney, Jeff. *Diary of a Wimpy Kid: Greg Heffley's Journal.* New York: Amulet Books, 2007.

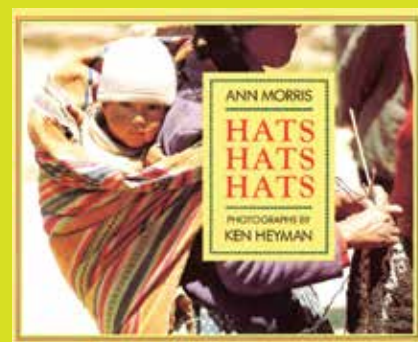
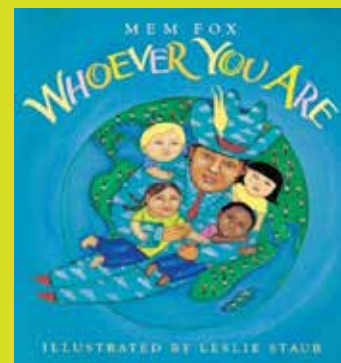
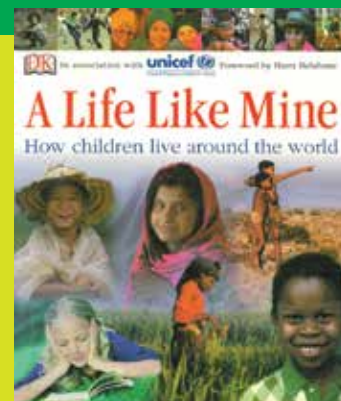
Morris, Ann, and Ken Heyman. *Hats, Hats, Hats (Around the World Series).* New York: Harper Collins, 1993.

Sasek, Miroslav. *This is Ireland.* New York: Universe, 2005.

Sipe, Kelly. *What It Takes to be a Hero.* Bloomington, IN: Inspiring Voices, 2012.

Wing, Natasha, and Amy Wummer. *The Night before St. Patrick's Day.* New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 2009.

van Wyck, Chris. *Nelson Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom.* New York: Roaring Brook Press, 2009.





and begin to understand the interconnectedness of the world in which they live. The Global 2.0 project provided just such an opportunity to the teachers and students who participating in it.

### “Center Time! Zooming In!”

There is nothing quite like the amazed expression of children watching Google Earth zoom into their own school building or their sister school on the other side of the globe. Technology grabs and holds young learners through color, sound, animation, and the ability to interact with text in ways that other formats simply do not offer. The children’s excitement can motivate them to learn the skills and knowledge that will be expected in school and work throughout their lifetimes.

In one activity, students studied online maps, locating cities and towns across the globe where their friends live. The teacher guided the students to consider a focusing question and follow-up queries: “If we wanted to go and visit our friends in Cape Town, how would we get there? Could we take a boat? Would that be the best way? Why?” Children engaged in conversations about transportation while trying to decide how to reach their friends. New comments and questions were sparked: “Wow, they’re so far way!” “Is it cold because they are closer to the South Pole?” “What do the colors [on the map] mean?” “Hmmm. I sure don’t want to drive there!”

Students used iPad apps to see dazzling visuals from National Geographic World Atlas, U.S. Geography by Discovery Education, World Explorer by AudioGuidia, or Barefoot World Atlas from Touch Press. They constructed “anchor charts” throughout the project when needed to make visible the process of thinking or using a particular Internet tool. For example, one teacher developed step-by-step directions, posted in the classroom’s technology explorations center, for finding a location using Google Earth, so that students could do the activity independently.

Another chart, constructed by students in North Carolina around the concept of resources, included the following questions: “What do you think you would find in a market in Cape Town, South Africa, that we buy in our town? What kinds of items might be different? Why?” The teacher then guided the class in developing an anchor chart, “Using Local Resources,” that identified occupations (farms, fishing, tourism, building, and retail), goods (meat, dairy products, seafood, and vegetables), services (restaurants, markets, tourist activities, and shops), and trade (of food, clothing, and tourist items). The charts were then posted in the classroom, and images of the charts were shared with the classroom in Cape Town. Finally, students revised and expanded the charts based on feedback from students in Cape Town.

All of these activities are far different undertakings from writing pen pal letters, sending them by airmail, and waiting weeks for a response—a practice from not so long ago. Live communication between students on opposite sides of the Earth provides cultural cues, prompts questions, and allows for instant back-and-forth conversation. The Global 2.0 lessons provided

a platform for every branch of traditional literacy: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. At the same time, students developed skills using internet resources and communication platforms, enabling future global connections and interactions and scaffolding the skills of 21st century citizens. ●

### Notes

1. Joan Barnatt, Marna Winter, Verity Norman, Danielle Baker, and Sheri Wiecezorek, “Using Cultural Artifacts to Understand Self and Other: A Global Exchange in Elementary Classrooms,” *Ohio Social Studies Review*, 51, no. 1 (2014):7-17.
2. Ruth Helen Yopp and Hallie Kay Yopp, “Young Children’s Limited and Narrow Exposure to Informational Text,” *The Reading Teacher* 65, no. 7 (2012): 480–490.
3. William G. Brozo, Sari Sulkunen, Gerry Shiel, Christine Garbe, Ambigapathy Pandian, and Renate Valtin. “Reading, Gender, and Engagement,” *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 57, no. 7 (2014): 584–593.
4. Sharon Ruth Gill, “What Teachers Need to Know about the “New” Nonfiction,” *The Reading Teacher* 63, no. 4 (2009): 260–267.
5. Elena Forzani and Donald Leu, “New Literacies for New Learners: The Need for Digital Technologies in Primary Classrooms,” *The Educational Forum* (2012). [dx.doi.org/10.1080/00131725.2012.708623](https://doi.org/10.1080/00131725.2012.708623)
6. Lara J Handsfield, Tami R. Dean, and Kristin M. Cielocha, “Becoming Critical Consumers and Producers of Text: Teaching Literacy with Web 1.0 and Web 2.0,” *The Reading Teacher* 63, no. 1 (2009): 40–50.

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