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What Does the Digital Student Want? Cross-Cultural Collaboration and Wikis in Academic Literacy

ABSTRACT

New online educational tools have opened new possibilities for cross-cultural collaboration which supports critical thinking and encourages learner autonomy. Nevertheless, the success of a cross-cultural collaborative experience cannot be taken for granted, since it inevitably involves the need to bridge transcultural differences. This paper presents an American-Slovene cross-cultural collaborative project with a focus on the perceptions of the Slovene student-participants. In particular, it examines their views of one of the components of the collaborative project, specifically, the collaborative wiki writing assignment, introduced to develop the students' academic literacy skills. The findings of the questionnaire study show that the participants' experiences with the cross-cultural collaboration were positive, although their answers reveal a slight preference for less challenging activities. Nevertheless, even the fairly demanding writing assignment was generally perceived to be interesting and useful: while its full interactive potential was not realized due to the participants' reluctance to engage in editing, the wiki is clearly an efficient tool for promoting academic literacy.

Keywords: academic literacy development; cross-cultural collaboration; online educational tools; wiki

Kaj hočejo digitalni študenti? Medkulturno sodelovanje in wikiji pri razvijanju akademske pismenosti

POVZETEK

Nova spletna orodja za izobraževanje odpirajo nove možnosti za medkulturno sodelovanje, ki spodbuja kritično razmišljanje in avtonomijo pri učenju. Kljub temu pa ne moremo brezpogojno pričakovati, da bo vsaka medkulturna izobraževalna izkušnja uspešna, saj je pri tovrstnem sodelovanje vedno treba premagovati medkulturne razlike. V prispevku je predstavljen ameriško-slovenski projekt medkulturnega izobraževalnega sodelovanja; osredotočava se na analizo mnenj slovenskih študentov – udeležencev v projektu. Še posebej se osredotočava na eno od komponent pri medkulturnem projektu, tj. skupinsko pisno nalogo v obliki wikija, ki je bila namenjena razvijanju akademske pismenosti. Rezultati vprašalnika pokažejo, da so bile izkušnje sodelujočih pri medkulturnem projektu pozitivne, čeprav odgovori pokažejo tudi preferenco sodelujočih do aktivnosti, ki so predstavljale manjši izziv. Kljub temu pa so sodelujoči tudi sicer precej zahtevno pisno nalogo ocenili kot zanimivo in uporabno: čeprav možnosti interaktivnosti, ki jih je ponujala, niso bile izkoriščene v celoti, saj so bili sodelujoči nekoliko zadržani do urejanja besedila, se je wiki izkazal za uporabno orodje za razvijanje akademske pismenosti.

Ključne besede: razvoj akademske pismenosti; medkulturno sodelovanje; spletna orodja za izobraževanje; wiki

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1 Introduction

Emerging online educational technologies have opened new possibilities for virtual cross-cultural collaboration. Studies have shown that this type of transnational technology-enhanced learning experience offers a variety of advantages. Collaborative learning provides support for reflection, critical thinking and learner autonomy (cf. Chorney 2007), while cross-cultural contact raises students' cultural awareness, a key aspect of the contemporary society. As Wang (2011, 243) points out, "[p]reparing college students to become global citizens with intercultural communication skills and sensitivity to cultural differences has become one of the important tasks in higher education." Tarras et al. (2013, 415–16) highlight the advantage of virtual cross-cultural collaboration which enables the students to engage in authentic "cross-cultural interaction," but eliminates the financial burden and the time requirements. In language learning, authentic interactive experiences constitute another important advantage of cross-cultural collaboration (cf. Yang and Chen 2014).

However, the success of a cross-cultural collaborative experience[1] is by no means guaranteed (cf. McLaughlin and Ponte (1997), whose study focuses on the emotional aspects of cross-cultural collaboration), since online transnational encounters inevitably involve the need to bridge cultural differences (cf. Liu et al. 2010, 177). While the issue of cultural differences in communication has been explored in a variety of contexts (cf. Gąsior 2015; Stopar 2015; Pisanski Peterlin 2005; Clyne 1991), Kraus and Sultana (2008, 58–59) point out that it is surprising how rarely the challenges of cross-cultural collaboration are addressed, whereas the advantages are taken for granted. It seems likely that some components of cross-cultural collaborative learning, above all those that require the active participation of students, present a particular challenge. By exploring the perceptions of the participants of cross-cultural collaborative projects more light can be shed on this issue (cf. also Yang et al. 2014 for a more detailed argumentation).

The aim of this paper is to present an American-Slovene cross-cultural collaborative project that took place in the spring of 2013, focusing in particular on the collaborative writing assignment, and to examine the Slovene student-participants' views of the cross-cultural collaborative experience in general and the writing task in particular.

2 Developing Academic Literacy through Collaborative Writing

New web-based technologies present opportunities for students and educators, but they also require novel pedagogical approaches based on a focus on student-centered learning and the form in course development (cf. Botshon 2006, 2014 for a more comprehensive overview of the issue). Research suggests that there is a wide range of advantages to using collaborative writing[2]

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[1] The term "cross-cultural collaboration" is used in the sense of McLaughlin and Ponte (1997), Wang (2011), Taras et al. (2013), Yang et al. (2014), etc. For more detail, cf. Tarras et al.'s Table 6 (2013, 428) where the behaviors and activities associated with cross-cultural collaborative projects are outlined.

[2] Throughout this paper, the term "collaborative writing" is used in the sense of "the joint production or the co-authoring of a text by two or more writers" (Storch 2011, 275); Storch also highlights the fact that the identifying characteristic of collaborative writing is "the joint ownership of the document produced," which

assignments in academic literacy development. Storch (2011, 284) highlights that collaborative writing tasks provide opportunities for learners to "deliberate about their own and their peers' language use as they attempt to create meaning"; similarly, reflection is one of the aspects underlined by Aydin and Yildiz (2014, 160), who furthermore maintain that collaborative writing "creates a sense of community" among both L1 and L2 student writers. One of the important benefits of collaborative writing is immediate access to peer feedback and a sense of an audience (cf. Kuteeva 2011, 49), both vital elements in the acquisition of academic writing skills.

Online collaborative writing tasks appear to be particularly effective in promoting academic literacy because they are readily embraced by learners (cf. Kessler 2009; Storch 2011), possibly due to their interactive design. Kuteeva (2011) underlines the potential of social web applications for "empowering learners to create online content in a collaborative way" (Kuteeva 2011, 45), drawing attention to wikis as being especially suitable for developing academic writing skills. A wiki is a digital application which enables users to add or edit the content, while a record of changes is kept that makes it possible to keep track of the revision history (cf. Leuf and Cunningham 2001, 14; Kuteeva 2011, 45). Kessler (2009, 80) notes the uniqueness of wikis among computer-mediated communication educational tools due to their permanent retention of each version of every post, which allows the viewers to investigate the history of a wiki, as well as the fact that all users can edit the wiki, meaning that "a wiki-based text is in a constant state of potential collaborative change."[3]

Studies of using wikis for collaborative writing have shown that they tend to be well-accepted by the students; thus Kost (2011, 618) reports that the participants in her study "enjoyed working together and are in favor of more collaborative writing activities in other classes for which most of them would like to use wikis again." However, Twu (2010, 57) notes that the attitudes towards wikis may be conditioned by the culture of the learners, arguing that "[l]earners from different cultural groups may perceive and interact differently in Wiki-based learning environments because the influence of their cultural perceptions regulates their interaction." Twu (2010, 58) draws attention to the fact that in high context cultures, such as China, "students are expected to be humble" and tend to avoid expressing their critical opinion on the work of their peers; providing critical feedback is within the exclusive domain of the teacher who is in the position of an authority.

In Hall's (1976) framework of cultural dimensions, high context cultures are fairly homogenous cultures where much of the meaning of a message is conveyed implicitly rather than explicitly. In his study on the rhetorical differences between Slovene and English promotional webpages, Grad (2014, 55) highlights the association between high context cultures and collectivism and greater power distance that has been established in the literature (cf. for instance Würtz 2005). While the United States is a low context culture (Hall 1976), according to Grad (2014, 56), Slovenia may be considered a high context culture. Therefore Slovene students may feel somewhat more reluctant to comment on the work of their peers than American students, which may result in unequal participation of the two groups in collaborative activities. Moreover, the traditional perception of the position of a student in a high context culture may be further reinforced by linguistic factors. Virtual cross-cultural collaboration between American and Slovene students inevitably entails communication exclusively in English: as a result, the Slovene students, being non-native speakers, may feel less confident or even less entitled to comment on the work of the other students.

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distinguishes collaborative writing activities from group planning and peer feedback activities.

[3]   The features highlighted by Kessler can now be found in tools extensively used in educational settings, such as Google Docs, which are not referred to as wikis, although they are very similar to wikis in design and function.

3 The Postcolonial Collaboratory Project

The Postcolonial Collaboratory Project (PCP) was designed to give the students an opportunity to engage in transcultural communication and to explore how virtual collaboration can enhance the learning experience. There were two partners participating in the project: a Postcolonial Literature class at UMA (University of Maine at Augusta in the U.S.) and a Postcolonial Societies and Cultures class at the Department of Translation, University of Ljubljana in Slovenia. The focus of the project was to explore common themes focusing on the postcolonial Caribbean by using an assortment of different materials, ranging from literary texts, essays, interviews, newspaper articles and webpages. The duration of the PCP was 6 weeks (from February to April 2013). For the Slovene students, participation in the PCP was compulsory, but it was not assessed.

Different types of activities were used throughout the project, encompassing both synchronous and asynchronous activities. Interaction occurred at two levels: classwork, with both groups of students and both teachers present, and group work, with students working in small groups. The different types of activities are presented in greater detail below, with a special focus on the wiki writing assignments.

Classwork

In **synchronous classwork**, the two classes connected by using compressed video technology, i.e., high quality video transmission. The classes met in rooms especially equipped for telecollaboration. Synchronous class meeting encompassed short lectures and class discussion moderated by the teachers and the presentation of the wiki assignments.

Asynchronous classwork entailed participation in a virtual classroom and accessing online course sites, where materials needed to support the collaborative work and announcements were posted.

Group work

In **synchronous group work**, students worked in randomly selected groups of seven, eight or nine students; there were American and Slovene students in each group. Synchronous group work involved virtual meetings using both video conferencing and instant messaging. The students were given assignments to complete in the group meetings.

Asynchronous group work involved working on a collaborative writing assignment in the form of a wiki, presented in more detail in 3.1 below. Group members communicated using email messaging.

3.1 Wiki Assignment

The wiki assignment (or wiki project) entailed collaborative text construction in small groups to develop the students' academic literacy skills by encouraging them to explore concepts related to the literatures and cultures of the postcolonial Caribbean. The framework of the assignment was similar to that used in other studies of collaborative wiki projects (cf. Kessler 2009; Kuteeva 2011; Kost 2011). At the onset of the PCP, each group was assigned a concept/term related to Postcolonialism, such as *orientalism*, *mimicry* or *mestizo*.

The group members were asked to investigate the origin and the meaning of the term, its use in

postcolonial contexts and its specific significance in the Caribbean literatures and cultures. They were invited to use the assigned texts and additional materials to examine the concept. The group members then worked together to produce a coherent wiki on their topic. They were encouraged to make use of the interactive and hybrid potential of the wiki genre.

The interactive dimension of the wiki was highlighted by prompting the students to not only add their own content, but also to edit and comment on the contributions of the other group members. The hybrid dimension of the wiki was foregrounded by suggesting that the students include non-textual material (video, images, hyperlinks) and structure the content of the wiki to reflect that it is both a web-based and an academic genre.

In the final class meeting, wiki assignments were presented by the groups to both classes simultaneously, using compressed video to connect.

4 Methods

A questionnaire-based study was used to investigate the students' attitudes towards the PCP.

4.1 Participants

Of the 47 Slovene students enrolled in the 2013 Postcolonial Societies and Cultures class at the Department of Translation, University of Ljubljana, 32 participated in the post-project questionnaire study (henceforth referred to as participants). All the participants were third-year students of the bachelor's programme in Interlingual Communication at the University of Ljubljana. All the students were native speakers of Slovene, but they generally had a high level of proficiency in English.

4.2 Data Collection and Analysis

The questionnaire used in this study was part of a larger survey completed by participants in the closing stages of the PCP. The questionnaire was composed of six items focusing on the participants' general perceptions of and attitudes towards online cross-cultural collaboration and their specific views of the writing assignment. Five of the questions were rating scale questions; for each of these questions the participants were able to post additional comments. One question was open ended. Only the responses and comments referring to the wiki assignment were included in this study. The questionnaire was designed using Survey Monkey, a web-based survey development tool.

The Survey Monkey platform was also used for questionnaire distribution. An anonymous questionnaire was sent to all 47 Slovene students participating in the PCP, allowing the students to access the questionnaire at their convenience. After the period of one week, 32 responses were collected.

5 Results

The results of the questionnaire-based study are presented sections 5.1–5.6 below.

5.1 Overall Satisfaction with the PCP Experience

The results for Question 1 are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Overall satisfaction with the PCP experience.

	%
Extremely satisfied	16%
Moderately satisfied	53%
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	22%
Moderately dissatisfied	9%
Extremely dissatisfied	0%

In Question 1, the participants rated their satisfaction with the PCP using a Likert-type scale.[4] The results show a very positive overall attitude towards the PCP (just under 70% of the students were satisfied with the collaboration to some extent). Just over a fifth of the students reported a neutral attitude and less than 10% were somewhat dissatisfied with the experience.

There were no specific comments referring to the wiki assignment.

5.2 Perception of the Work Load

The results for Question 2 are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Perception of the number of assignments.

	%
Much too many	3%
Somewhat too many	31.5%
About the right amount	65.5%
Somewhat too few	0%
Much too few	0%

In Question 2, the participants reported their perception of their work load in the PCP using a Likert-type scale. The results show that approximately two thirds of the students believed that their work load was adequate, while approximately one third believed that their work load was somewhat too large.

There were no specific comments referring to the wiki assignment.

5.3 Level of Interest

The results for Question 3 are presented in Table 3 in the form of mean scores.

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[4]   In interpreting the results of a Likert-type scale, the fact that respondents in any survey exhibit a bias towards the median values needs to be considered. In addition, the median value generally represents the most neutral answer.

Table 3. Mean scores for level of interest.

	Mean score
Classwork (videoconferences)	1.06
Group meetings	1.06
Wikis	0.81

In Question 3, the participants rated their level of interest for the three collaborative activities (videoconferences, virtual group meetings and wiki writing assignments) to be on a Likert-type scale from -2 to 2, with the neutral midpoint at 0. Scores above 0 reflect a positive attitude.

There were no specific comments referring to the wiki assignment.

5.4 Type of Activities in the Wiki Assignment

The results for Question 4 are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Type of activities in wiki assignment.

	I contributed substantially	I contributed a little	I never contributed
Posting own material	60%	40%	0
Editing	3%	10%	87%
Communication	32%	45%	23%
Presentation	19%	44%	37%

In Question 4, the participants reported on how frequently they participated in four activities connected with the wiki assignments, i.e., posting materials (textual content, images, hyperlinks), editing the work of other group members, communicating about the content of the wiki and presentation of their wiki assignments, using a three-level rating scale (substantially – a little – never).

There were two comments on Question 4 relating to the wiki assignment; the comments are given below:[5]

Comment 1: "I would have loved to participate more but there have been other obligations: thesis, seminar works, etc."

Comment 2: "For the editing and presenting were in charge those who did not do the reporting yet."

5.5 Perception of Usefulness of Wiki Assignment

The results for Question 5 are presented in Table 5.

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[5]   The comments are reported verbatim.

Table 5. Perception of usefulness of the wiki assignment.

	%
Extremely useful	12.5%
Very useful	37.5%
Moderately useful	37.5%
Slightly useful	9.5%
Not at all useful	3%

Table 5. Perception of usefulness of the wiki assignment.

In Question 5, the participants rated their perception of the usefulness of the wiki assignment using a five-point rating scale. The results show that most students (97%) perceived the assignment to be at least somewhat useful.

Two of the students posted comments on the usefulness of the wiki assignment, the comments are given below:

Comment 3: "The wikis were mostly finished after the text analysis."

Comment 4: "I believe that the problem was that many students spend a relatively short time on the assignments and did little in-depth work on the topic. They would post images or hyperlinks."

5.6 Students' Suggestions

In Question 6 the students were invited to suggest ways of improving the PCP in the future. Below are four comments referring specifically to the wiki assignment (of the total 20 comments provided in response to Question 6):

Comment 5: "smaller groups, more time to prepare the project "

Comment 6: "I think the project was great. It's always good to see how students in other countries work on topics similar to ours."

Comment 7: "All in all, I like the idea of the project because it is an innovative approach to learning and it enables the classes to be more dynamic. Maybe it would be better to make smaller groups."

Comment 8: "The groups should be smaller, so everyone could contribute more."

6 Discussion

The aim of this paper was to examine the Slovene student-participants' perceptions of and attitudes towards the collaborative writing assignment as part of the PCP. The questionnaire study revealed that both the PCP as well as the writing assignment were well-received, but the results also point to several issues that merit further investigation.

The replies to the two general questions, Questions 1 and 2, show that the participants were quite satisfied with the overall experience of the PCP and that most of them perceived their work load in the PCP to be appropriate. In Question 1, just under 10% of the 32 participants reported some degree of dissatisfaction, while the attitude of over 90% of the participants was either neutral (22%), somewhat positive (53%) or very positive (16%). Taking into account the

advantages of transnational collaboration highlighted in the literature – such as autonomous learning and in-depth reflection (Chorney 2007), developing intercultural competence (Wang 2011), as well as the specific advantage that authentic interaction in L2 offers to L2 students (Yang and Chen 2014, 57) – such views are not difficult to account for.

The replies to Question 2 suggest that even though they were required to be involved in a variety of activities in the PCP (in addition to being expected to do some of their regular course work), over half of the participants believed that their work load was not inappropriate. Another possible reason for this perception may be that the participants were willing to take on some extra work because they believed they benefited from the experience. Comment 1 (in response to Question 4) highlights the fact that the work load was an issue for some of the participants.

In Question 3 the participants commented on whether they found the different components of the PCP interesting: the replies in the form of mean scores reveal two important issues. The first is that all the participants' attitudes towards the three components listed in the question (videoconferences, virtual group meetings and wiki writing assignments) were positive: the participants perceived all three components to be motivating. The second issue is that the wiki writing assignment was perceived to be somewhat less interesting (the mean score was 0.87) than class videoconferences and virtual group meeting (the mean score for both was 1.06). This means that the participants found passive participation (compressed video lectures and class meetings where they did not have to engage in discussion unless they specifically wished to do so) and unstructured virtual meetings in small groups (without the teachers present) somewhat more stimulating than the writing assignment, where their active participation was required and visible. This raises the issue of whether the degree of monitoring of their input by the teachers and other learners played a role in their perceptions of different activities. The preference for low-stakes activities may be due to the fact that cross-cultural contact is challenging and can be stressful. McLaughlin and Ponte (1997, 105) note that "[t]he necessary involvement of the whole person and the emotional effort to understand in a situation where you may not be able to rely on assumptions or 'taken-for-granteds' is emotionally demanding and tiring."

The participants' replies to the two questions focusing specifically on the wiki assignment (Questions 4 and 5) provide more information on this issue. The replies to Question 4 show that all the participants contributed to the wiki assignment, but the way in which they did so varied significantly. Adding content was something that all the participants engaged in; moreover, more than half of the participants believed that they had contributed significantly to the content of the collaborative writing assignment. This is a direct contradiction to the perception expressed in Comment 4 (in response to Question 5), which suggests that the author of the comment believed that most students contributed only a very small amount of mostly non-textual material. The length of the text in the wikis and insight into their revision history clearly support the replies to Question 4: most students contributed significant amounts of text to the wikis. The replies to Question 4 also show that most participants were involved in communicating about the wiki with the other members of their group, although almost one quarter of the participants claimed that they never participated in any communication on the topic. The replies to Question 4 further show that the participants were even more reluctant to get involved in the editing process: almost 90% of the students reported that they did not participate in editing the posts of other students.

There seem to be two possible reasons for the reluctance to critically engage with the work contributed by other learners: one is that in the writing assignment the participants were expected to engage in activities that they felt uncomfortable with in their role as learners, and the second

is that the Slovene students felt inhibited as non-native speakers and left the editing to their American peers. Slovene students, belonging to a high context culture (cf. Grad 2014), may be somewhat reluctant to provide peer feedback and correction, just as Twu (2010, 58) notes of the Chinese learners. This raises the question whether more extensive instructions on wiki-editing are needed in cross-cultural collaboration prior to assigning the task.

Furthermore, the impact of the choice of language in cross-cultural virtual collaboration certainly merits further examination: when the language of communication is the first language of one group of students and the second language of the other group, as in the case of the PCP, the members of the non-native speaker group may feel less entitled to comment on language issues such as editing. Yang et al.'s (2014) findings show that language barriers play an important role in cross-cultural collaboration, reducing somewhat the participation of non-native speaker students. Language attitude research certainly seems to point in that direction: the results of a study on the attitudes of trainee translators towards the use of English as a Lingua Franca have shown that trainee translators believe that native speakers have a clear advantage over English as a Lingua Franca users in academic communication in English (Pisanski Peterlin 2013).

Yet in spite of this reluctance, the replies to Question 5 underscore the fact that the vast majority of participants in the PCP (97%) perceived the wiki assignment to be useful. The evaluations of the degree of usefulness varied, with almost three quarters of the participants believing it was moderately to very useful. The perception of usefulness may be linked to some extent to the fact that wikis tend to appeal to students, because they are novel, web-based and interactive. Research focusing on wikis as a platform for collaboration in academic literacy development (cf. Kessler 2009; Kost 2011; Storch 2011) has consistently shown that wikis are generally well-liked as a learning tool. Comment 3 in response to Question 5 underlines the fact that the wikis were used to synthesise the knowledge obtained throughout the PCP.

The comments referring to the wiki projects in response to Question 6 highlight two issues that were perceived as negative: group size (the groups were perceived to be too big) and limited time available to complete the assignment. Two of the comments explicitly state a positive view of the wiki project, placing emphasis on transnational contact with other students and an innovative, dynamic learning approach.

7 Conclusion

While the findings of the questionnaire study clearly show that the Slovene student-participants' experiences with the cross-cultural collaboration in the PCP were positive overall, they nevertheless echo some of the issues raised in the literature. Although cross-cultural collaboration clearly has its advantages, such as helping the students to develop an active attitude towards intercultural communication (cf. Yang and Chen 2014, 73), McLaughlin and Ponte (1997, 110) point out that it can also "go very wrong and not be a learning experience," underscoring that the participants in their study needed times of "low-demand." The answers of the participants in the present study suggest a slight preference for low-stakes, less challenging activities. However, even the writing assignment, which was considerably more demanding than listening to a live video-lecture, was generally perceived to be interesting and useful. While the full potential of the wiki as an interactive genre was not realized due to the participants' reluctance to engage in editing (possibly due to their cultural background or their worries about their language skills), it seemed to be an efficient tool for literacy developing activities. The fact that the genre is web-

based prompted the students to incorporate non-textual materials, thereby eliminating the need to participate solely through their L2. Furthermore, the collaborative approach ensured that the texts had an immediate audience and that the input received at least some peer feedback. Finally, the novelty of using a web-based genre to develop writing skills appeals to students who are digital natives.

The present study was limited to the perceptions of one group of participants in the transcultural collaboration, Slovene students, but it important to underline that they were by no means the only group whose perceptions need to be studied to gain a better understanding of the factors involved in cross-cultural experience. For example, evidence from the PCP suggests that at least some of the American students experienced another difficulty with the PCP: their comfort level with digital editing was clearly varied and not all of them were adept with the tools used in the PCP. This is partly due to the fact that there are many adult learners at UMA and older generations can find the technology intimidating.

Despite some of the challenges that both sets of students experienced, the Augusta-Ljubljana Postcolonial Collaboratory Project was an overwhelmingly positive experience. Merging two classes from different parts of the world meant that the students were able to reach new insights into postcolonial literature and culture. Adding a cross-cultural perspective brought the conversations to another level and set the stage for a new set of conversations, otherwise unreachable in monocultural settings. There is no doubt that this project should be repeated, especially now that some of the challenges have been identified and can be further addressed.

Cross-cultural collaboration needs to be given attention in any university context, but for translators and language mediators, developing the skills to bridge cultural differences and avoid potential pitfalls is particularly relevant. The PCP itself and the opinions of the participants in the project can help us understand the needs and challenges that such collaboration entails. They also contribute to the planning of future cross-cultural collaborative projects and ways of incorporating academic literacy assignments into such projects.

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