

## DEVELOPING A BICULTURAL ORIENTATION

The River Valley High School Bicultural Studies (Chinese) Programme

Allan Ho

Ek Soo Ben

Tan Wan Sze

Wan Chiew Inn

River Valley High School  
Singapore

### ABSTRACT

In June 2004, the Straits Times published an article reporting our Senior Minister Mr Lee Kuan Yew's view on Singaporeans developing a bicultural orientation to better engage China and India.

(The Straits Times, 24 June 2004)

Entitled, "Go beyond Mandarin to connect with China; to engage in China's growth, you need to be 'bicultural' and understand the culture and world view too...", this idea has since formed the basis for the bicultural programmes developed in four Integrated Programme (IP) schools in Singapore.

River Valley High School (RVHS) started the Bicultural Studies (Chinese) Programme (BSP) in 2007, being the fourth school to offer the BSP. The BSP was launched to nurture a core group of students

with a high level of proficiency in the Chinese Language, as well as a strong understanding of China's culture, history and recent developments, in order to ignite passion in learning both Chinese and Western perspectives on contemporary issues.

In a global world, we envision our BSP graduates to be able to effectively co-engage the people of China and the Chinese-dominated societies as well as those in the non-Chinese speaking countries. The curriculum design is aligned with our IP coursework, using the "Teaching for Understanding" framework to articulate the development of ASK (attitude, skills and knowledge).

We believe that learning is best achieved if the students can see continuity from classroom to out-of-class experiences, as well as from one subject to another. BSP graduates have to develop a bicultural orientation within a global environment. Understanding the thinking of the movers and shakers in contemporary China and drawing on its lessons from its past becomes paramount in our lesson design. Hence, extended immersion in China and Taiwan becomes a critical part of the coursework.

The Immersion Programme will serve as a useful platform for these BSP students to apply their language skills and knowledge in a realistic context. By immersing in the countries' lifestyle, cultural ambience, and through interaction with the locals there, our students will be able to better appreciate the authenticity of the knowledge they have learnt. They will also engage in

a thinking process that constantly adjusts and refines what they have learnt in school with the immersion experience. They will learn to synthesize their knowledge with their real time experiences, truly taking charge of their own learning, which will result in an exponential rate that is not possible in a classroom-bound situation.

## INTRODUCTION

River Valley High School (RVHS) has a long and rich tradition as a Special Assistance Plan (SAP) school. As a SAP school, we have consciously sought to nurture a passion for the Chinese Language, culture and literature through our instructional and enrichment programmes. Our heritage as a former Chinese school provides a rich environment for the learning of Chinese and the nurturance of students with a bicultural orientation.

We started the Bicultural Studies (Chinese) Programme (BSP) in 2007, being the fourth school to offer the BSP. The BSP was launched to nurture a core group of students with a high level of proficiency in the Chinese Language, as well as a strong understanding of China's culture, history and recent developments, in order to ignite passion in learning both Chinese and Western perspectives on contemporary issues.

We have aligned our BSP coursework with the IP curriculum. The use of "Teaching for Understanding" (Perkins, 1992) framework to frame our BSP coursework also allows the students to transfer learning

across subject disciplines, from in-class to out-of-class experiences.

In our BSP, we envision our graduates to become cultural brokers who can negotiate two culturally distinct environments with ease. They will be able to appreciate contemporary China Studies from a variety of perspectives: micro to global, from the perspectives of China, the Chinese-speaking community and Singapore, to the global world. They will have a high level of proficiency in the Chinese Language and command a strong understanding of China's history, thinking and culture. They also display keen interest in engaging and understanding contemporary Chinese society and China's developments from the Chinese and Western perspectives.

The nurturance of good habits of mind or attitude (A), critical thinking skills (S) and construction of knowledge (K) is clearly articulated in the BSP coursework. To better understand contemporary China and the thinking of the Chinese people, learning is made more authentic through extended immersion in China and Taiwan. Through immersion, we seek to further develop our students' bicultural orientation and further their understanding of ASK.

In this paper, the authors will attempt to explain the development of the RVHS Bicultural Studies (Chinese) Programme, tracing the curriculum conceptualisation stage to the classroom experience of the students. It will also seek to connect the learning in class to the immersion programmes that the students have undergone in China and Taiwan. By providing them with authentic learning

experiences to apply what they have learnt, we seek to guide them in developing the concept of “bicultural orientation” as epitomised by our Senior Minister.

#### DEVELOPING THE BSP AT RVHS

In 2005, with the approval of the River Valley High School Integrated Programme to begin in 2006, we began our preparation for the BSP curriculum. The course development of the RVHS BSP focused

on the following key ideas:

- 1 Senior Minister’s vision as reported in The Straits Times when he gave an interview to the journalist on his views of bicultural orientation
- 2 Developing ASK (good habits of mind or attitude, critical thinking skills and knowledge construction)
- 3 Designing our curriculum and adopting pedagogy using the “Teaching for Understanding” curriculum framework, and
- 4 Providing experiential learning through extended immersion in China, Taiwan and a western country

The BSP graduate

*Said Senior Minister Mr Lee Kuan Yew, ‘Bilingualism gets us through the front door, but it*

*is only through biculturalism that we can reach deep inside China and work with them.’*

An example is Dr Lim Boon Keng, a Straits Chinese Queen’s Scholar who was born

in 1869 and studied in Scotland. He learnt Chinese as an adult and promoted its use

in schools. He was active in Singapore and in China as a social reformer.

'He was an outstanding example of a bilingual and bicultural Singaporean Chinese of that era who contributed to both China and Singapore's development.'

Reported in The Straits Times, 24 June 2004

In RVHS, we envision our graduates to be cultural brokers who can negotiate two culturally distinct environments with ease. They will be able to appreciate contemporary China Studies from a variety of perspectives: micro to global, from the perspectives of China, the Chinese-speaking community and Singapore, to the global world. They will have a high level of proficiency in the Chinese Language and command a strong understanding of China's history, thinking and culture. They also display keen interest in engaging and understanding contemporary Chinese society and China's developments from the Chinese and Western perspectives.

Central to our BSP coursework is the concept of bicultural orientation. According to Leung (2003), people of diverse cultural backgrounds develop a sense of their own bicultural identity through a process of construction, deconstruction and reconstruction in a safe place.

In order to be culturally competent, LaFromboise et al. (1993, p.396)<sup>1</sup> opined that, "an individual must possess a strong personal identity, have knowledge of and facility with the beliefs and values of the culture, display sensitivity to the affective

processes of the culture, communicate clearly in the language of the given cultural group, perform socially sanctioned behaviour, maintain active social relations within the cultural group, and negotiate the institutional structures of that culture". Extending this concept, he explained that a biculturally competent individual possesses a high degree of resilience through a strong sense of himself in one or more cultural contexts.

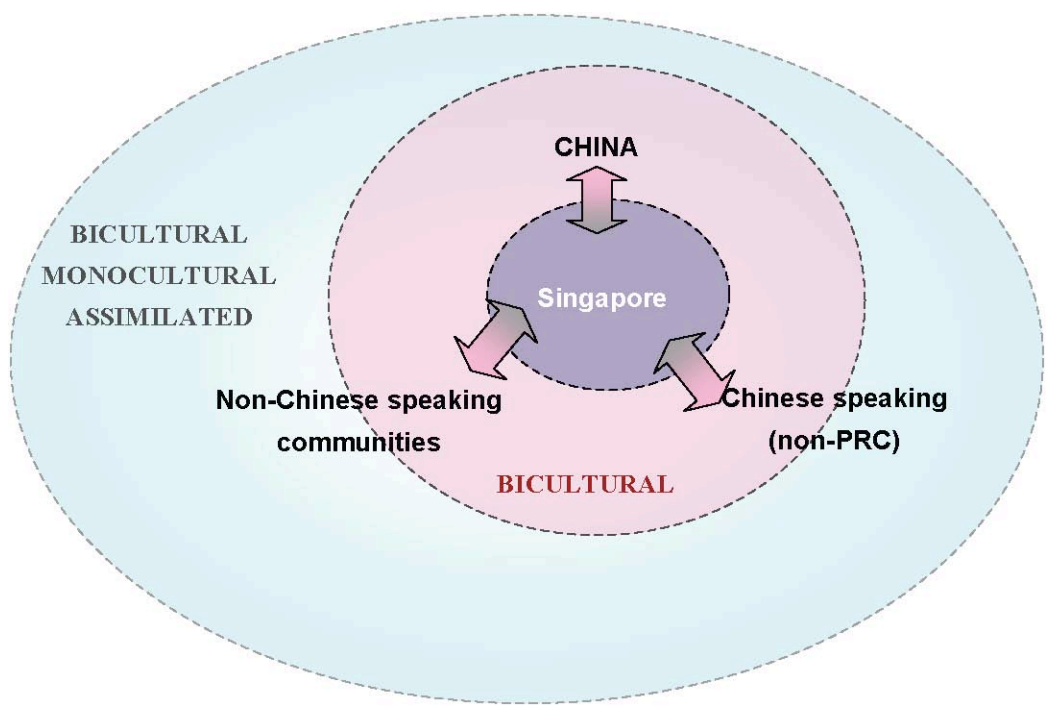
Figure 1 depicts our conception of how a bicultural orientation is nurtured. This conception is based on what SM Lee articulated, and the characteristics of BSP graduates and the objectives of the BSP coursework. Hence understanding the experience of a biculturally competent person becomes an important part of our coursework as we seek to understand how he develops a bicultural identity, crosses cultural boundaries and works best with others who also must cross these boundaries successfully.

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People with a bicultural orientation possess an ability to understand and function effectively in two cultural environments. The RVHS bicultural students will have the capability to respond to the unique needs of both the Chinese and the Western

culture (as shown in the three arrows connecting communities to Singapore). They would have knowledge regarding the beliefs and values of the two cultures which will help them negotiate between these two cultures. Extending this, they can also function effectively in non-Chinese bicultural, mono-cultural or other assimilated societies in the global world (as shown by the blue shaded areas)

Figure 1: RVHS BSP Concept of Bicultural Orientation



A bicultural orientation also facilitates effective communication of ideas, information, perception and preferences in both verbal and non-verbal style of their Chinese and Western counterparts. In a global world, the bicultural RVHS graduates will be able to effectively co-engage the people of China and the Chinese-dominated societies, namely, the Chinese communities in the Western countries and South East Asia as well as those in the non-Chinese speaking countries which refer mainly to the Euro-centric countries and the Indian sub-continent.

Developing ASK

*“That is the model of bicultural people Mr Lee wants to see among Singaporeans: people at home in both Western and Asian culture, who not only speak the language, but also understand its society, and are able to make an impact, whether in business, or in the public sector. “*

Reported in “The Straits Times”, 24 June 2004

The key objectives of our effort are to nurture pupils’ passion for the subject, develop student leadership through participation in the programme, raise the standard of scholarship in the learning of the Chinese language, culture, history and literature; and develop pupils’ global

perspective through foreign immersion and exchange programmes.

In similar articulation of the pedagogy used in our Integrated Programme, the BSP seeks to nurture good habits of mind (A), critical thinking skills (S) and the construction of key concepts and knowledge (K) in bicultural studies.

Habits of Mind (A) Our main focus in BSP(C) is to inspire in students a passion for lifelong learning, embrace openness and diversity through the two-way exchange between the East and the West.

Critical Thinking Skills (S) To develop pro-active and reflective thinkers who can differentiate, integrate and negotiate differences between the East and the West, critical thinking skills are greatly emphasized in our curriculum. Our critical thinking training includes observation skills, analytical and independent thinking, and reasoning processes.

Construction of Knowledge (K) Through experiential learning (Academic Programme, CID Programme) and experiential learning (Immersion Programme), students will be able to construct their understanding of issues pertaining to contemporary China and the rest of the world, and finally address these problems from different perspectives.

Through developing these attitudes, skills and an understanding of different cultures, our students

will acquire a deeper understanding of contemporary China. They will also learn to appreciate the role that language and culture play in society in general. This will also enable them to apply ASK in authentic environments when undergoing their immersion in China and Taiwan.

“Teaching for Understanding” in BSP

The intent of BSP(C) is to nurture a core group of students with a high level of proficiency in the Chinese Language, a strong understanding of China’s culture, thinking, history and recent developments, and passion in learning both Chinese and Western perspectives on contemporary issues.

Guided by this vision, the focus of our BSP curriculum is anchored in Chinese Studies and Chinese Culture, situated in the cultural and literary contexts of Language and Literature. The entire coursework will also be developed with a global perspective in mind, where the students acquire an appreciation of the role that language and culture play in society.

The BSP coursework is delivered through three key programmes in the RVIP, namely, the Academic Programme for BSP, the CID (Construct, Integrate and Differentiate) Programme and the CID Extended Learning. This is to ensure a seamless transition from Year 1 to Year 6 while at the same time providing integration across programmes.

The BSP includes Chinese language, Chinese literature and China Studies. Chinese language and Chinese literature are fundamentals to bicultural studies as they lay the foundation for the understanding of Chinese culture. China Studies will build on this foundation as students look into the cultural, social, economic, political and international relations of contemporary China.

The BSP will train the students to identify and compare and contrast the similarities and differences of fundamental concepts in various cultures as well as the cultural connotations of Chinese and English language. Simultaneously, students should understand that behind every culture lies a set of ethics and values. They should be able to look onto the ethical importance behind all literary concepts and ideas.

Our CID Programme provides students with opportunities to construct their own learning by integrating knowledge from various disciplines, using modes of inquiry appropriate to the subject or project that they are working on.

Students are given two generative topics to work on, namely “Yu and the Flood” (大禹治水) and “Silk Road” (丝绸之路) and are greatly encouraged to approach the topics from various perspectives. They will delve in depth into cultural, social, economic, political and international relations issues, as taught in the BSP.

The CID Chinese Programme serves as a strong foundation for research methodology. This foundation will prepare students to pursue individualised, research-oriented work in an area of their chosen field of study in the Immersion Programme, should the students opt to do their CID Extended learning in bicultural studies.

#### Experiential Learning through Extended Immersion

Experiential Learning refers to the sort of learning undertaken by students who acquire and apply knowledge, skills and feelings in an immediate and relevant setting. Instead of “merely thinking about the phenomena being studied” or simply “considering the possibility of doing something about it”, Experiential Learning involves a, “direct encounter with the phenomena” (Borzak 1981: 9 quoted in Brookfield 1983).

We believe that learning is best achieved if the students can see continuity from classroom to out-of-class experiences, as well as from one subject to another. BSP graduates have to develop a bicultural orientation within a global environment. Understanding the thinking of the movers and shakers in contemporary China and drawing on its lessons from its past becomes paramount in our lesson design. Hence, extended immersion in China and Taiwan has become a critical part of the coursework.

Therefore, Immersion Programme is an important platform for students to construct the concept of bicultural identity. Students participate in an immersion programme in China for up to 6 months and for 2 weeks in a western country. The key objective is to provide experiential learning opportunities for students to understand and develop their bicultural orientation through the application of their prior knowledge acquired in the BSP and CID Programme.

During immersion, students are given opportunities to attend classes in top schools and universities in China or seek attachments to local or overseas companies or institutions of higher learning. To demonstrate the outcome of experiential learning, students will attend MOE-organised enrichment programmes such as the Bicultural Studies Camp and Bicultural Studies Symposium for students from the different BSP schools to interact and share their experiences among themselves and with the community.

The BSP Immersion Programme is designed according to the *Teaching for Understanding* framework. In 2007, our pioneer batch of BSP students attended an Immersion Programme to Beijing, Xi'an and Shanghai. Using the generative topic of "Challenges faced by contemporary China", the students were immersed in an authentic Chinese environment as they explored various issues faced by the Chinese. Below is the unit planner for our Immersion Programme using the "Teaching for Understanding" framework.

Understanding Goals

UG1.	<i>Question form</i>	How does the rich historical past contribute to the development of contemporary China?
	<i>Statement form</i>	Students will appreciate the rich historical past of the Chinese and understand how the rich cultural heritage help to shape contemporary China as it is today.
UG2.	<i>Question form</i>	What are the challenges faced by contemporary China?
	<i>Statement form</i>	Students will understand the various cultural, social, economic, political and international relations challenges faced by China.

Teaching for Understanding Framework for BSP(C) Immersion Programme

<i>Understanding goals</i>	<i>Performances of Understanding</i>	<i>Ongoing Assessments</i>
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<p>UG1, UG2</p>	<p>Expedition to Emperor Qin Mausoleum</p> <p>Students will explore the Emperor Qin Mausoleum and learn about the importance of the unification of ancient China. They will make connections with contemporary China to analyse and discuss the unification issues China is facing at present.</p>	<p>Students feedback</p> <p>Feedback from Guide</p> <p>Feedback from teachers</p>
<p>UG1, UG2</p>	<p>Expedition to Forbidden City</p> <p>Students will look into the preservation of Forbidden City. At the end of the day, they will reflect about the heritage of the Chinese and participate in a forum at Beijing Renmin University to discuss the loss of heritage in present day China.</p>	<p>Students feedback</p> <p>Feedback from University Lecturers</p> <p>Feedback from teachers</p>

UG1, UG2	Expedition to Shanghai City Development Museum Students will identify and analyse issues brought about by the development of China. For e.g. pollution issues, loss of heritage, inflation problems etc. At the end of the day, they will have a discussion to share their learning points.	Students feedback Feedback from Guide Feedback from teachers
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As seen from the unit planner, the performances of understanding clearly engage the students in understanding how the past development of China impacted the current and future developments of the country. By interacting with their local peers, peers from China, lecturers in China and teachers, our BSP students could experience the impact by “participating in the event”. This is another facet of experiential learning (Houle, 1980). This immersion experience provided students with opportunities to hear perspectives from the people of China that in turn broadened their own view of the challenges faced by contemporary China.

OUR BSP EXPERIENCE

During the students’ expedition to China’s biggest and most complete historical site, Forbidden

City, students looked into the architecture as well as preservation of palaces during the *Ming* and *Qing* Dynasties. The dynamic structures and beauty of ancient architecture amazed the students and set them to explore further. At the end of the day, the students participated in a forum at *Renmin* University, Beijing. Here they discussed the heritage of China, how history played a part in the development of a nation, and the loss of heritage that challenged present day China.

Without going to the Forbidden City in person, the students would never be able to experience the development of classical Chinese and East Asian architecture, and their significance. This expedition also became a platform for students to explore issues like “Disputes over Starbucks in the Forbidden City” which were originally not in our syllabus. The Immersion Programme has definitely set students thinking about relevant issues and ignited a series of “knowledge explosions” initiated by the students themselves. Through this process, we could visibly see the students’ display of ASK.

At the end of the Immersion Programme, students were required to present a research paper based on a self-selected topic pertaining to “Challenges faced by Contemporary China”. Listed below were some of the topics:

- Beijing Olympics and its influence on China teenagers (北京奥运会对当地青少年的影响)
- Living environment in Shanghai and Singapore : Comparative Studies (上海与新加坡居住环境之比较)
- Shanghai’s attractions as a city for education: from international students’ perspective (上海吸引留学生的魅力何在?)

The students were mentored by professors and lecturers in China during the 6-week Immersion Programme and tutored by our own BSP teachers upon returning to Singapore. The students presented their final papers at the RVIP Learning Symposium in 2007. For next year, the students will have an opportunity to present their papers at the Bicultural Symposium organised by the Ministry of Education (Singapore) when they are in the third year of the BSP.

The BSP coursework designed by RVHS provides wide coverage of topics to allow students to gain further insights on bicultural studies from a global perspective. From the students' reflections, it is clearly evident that the students have benefited greatly from the Immersion Programme.

Below are excerpts of their accounts:

This is most representative of the students' attitude about immersion for it has truly recognised and appreciated the importance of the experiential learning process.

*“Biculturalism is a concept that cannot be learnt from the books or from lessons. It is like an abstract subject that can alone be truly acquired through immersions and real life experiences. Though its undeniable that we can get to know more about China by reading up on some historical events and current situation, we can only get to understand China by actually being there to comprehend the culture and lifestyle.”*

Goh Yi Hui (3K, 2007)

On the other hand, their understanding of biculturalism could be seen from the accounts below:

*“Before the two immersion trips to China and Taiwan, my perception of biculturalism was mostly classroom lessons, newspaper reading and watching news related to China’s present situations or latest developments. After the trips, I realized that Bicultural Studies Programme is much more than what I thought.*

*Recognizing the different ways of thinking, beliefs and culture have made me more open-minded. I realized that this kind of learning also fulfils biculturalism, not just through reading books and notes.”*

Luo Hui (3K, 2007)

From their accounts, we realised that the students could not describe biculturalism from the anthropological or cultural psychological point of view but they showed an understanding of how the concept was constructed by being situated in an authentic learning environment. This, to us, is the beginning of their discovery of creating meaning .

To better capture their understanding, we wanted the students to espouse their perception of China

before the trip and to reconcile it with the reality they experienced during the trip. Below are excerpts of their experiences:

*“Before I went to China, I saw China as a country struggling to step up the platform to compete with the other nations in terms of globalization, while her people’s standards of living were declining badly due to environmental circumstances such as air pollution and yet the government did nothing to meet their expectations.*

*However, I was proven terribly wrong after the trip to China in November, 2007. Since my visit to China in 2005, I observed that China’ attempts to change and raise the people’s standards of living in the endeavour of globalizing do deserve our commendation and this trip has allowed me to widen my perspectives of China, educating me on the importance to possess open-mindedness, instead of being biased towards China merely due to her past history where the people always seems to be suffering under the corrupted government. In my opinion, participating in these immersion programmes has widened my global perspective as a whole and allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of China’s current developments.”*

Sherry Goh (3K, 2007)

Although anecdotal, the above account showed that our students were able to demonstrate their viewpoint with a balanced consideration about cultural differences. This is a manifestation of our conscious effort to nurture in students Paul’s elements of reasoning. They also learnt to provide

an objective and non judgemental point of view towards culture that they were not familiar with. This could not be possible if the students had not experienced first hand the learning process.

*“I think the biggest takeaway from the trips is not only about the knowledge gained. It is the life skills that I have learnt like to be more matured, independent, and manage my impulsiveness. In addition, I learnt to better appreciate my life in Singapore.”*

Heng Shu Yun (3K, 2007)

The immersion provided the BSP students with authentic learning opportunities to apply ASK and work on their social skills. An unexpected gain from the immersion was the quiet admiration that the students have of their home country that strengthened their commitment and rootedness to Singapore.

#### CHALLENGES AHEAD

*“Nevertheless, Singapore had to persist in nurturing a bilingual society. In fact, the next rung of the challenge is to nurture from among the capable, ‘a few hundred students’ from each year’s cohort, who can master a higher level of Mandarin and have a deeper appreciation of China’s history and culture.”*

The Straits Times June 24, 2004

Indeed the challenge ahead is to nurture a core group of students who are bicultural and able to master a higher level of Mandarin and have a deeper appreciation of China's history and culture. Thus, the bigger challenge is how best to facilitate and develop students' bicultural orientation.

By exploring the use of different teaching strategies, we have continued to help students connect what they have learnt in class with the larger and external environment. The conscious use of ASK in their thinking and learning also encouraged them to embrace cultural differences and formulate their bicultural understanding with objectivity.

Next, the teachers had to grapple with the initial discomfort in a foreign place during an immersion. Through experiential learning, we took students' learning out of the classroom and their comfort zone, to participate in immersion programme and applying what they have learnt in a realistic context with first hand observation.

However, this experience has given the students new meaning to the language skills and knowledge acquired. This has helped them feel for what they have learnt and created a realistic motivation to get more out of their acquired knowledge by applying them in the process of writing. This has also provided a more authentic learning experience whereby they could use the language and knowledge in a totally relevant learning context.

The immersion also provided the students opportunities to synthesize information gathered from various platforms and use them strategically through in-depth critical thinking processes with the help of ASK. We also observed that the students were able to apply the habits of mind: perseverance, empathy, natural curiosity, open mindedness and others to craft their observations and solutions to various issues as shown by their work.

#### The Way Forward

In order to further enhance the bicultural experiences, it is important for us to further enhance our immersion programmes and strengthen the key learning points by providing the students with more authentic learning experiences. This, we hope, will deepen the students' learning experiences.

We can also try to explore other possible immersion destinations. This will provide varied eye-opening experiences for the students to further expand their understanding of different cultures.

This can also be done through cross department cooperation and collaboration. Cross disciplinary learning experiences such as History and Geography field trips will help to widen the perspectives of biculturalism beyond the boundaries of traditional disciplines.

Through this deepening and widening of learning experiences, we want the students to have an exponential learning experience which is more effective, realistic and truly applicable in the real world. Hopefully with the depth and width of the learning processes, the students will not only conceptualise biculturalism theoretically but also have an authentic, passionate understanding of biculturalism.

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