

Teens from different countries grade each other's work. Here's what happens.

For Grade 8s at a Scarborough public school, the Global Teenager Project brings surprising insights on topics from Nigerian schoolgirl abductions to homosexual rights.



KEITH BEATY / TORONTO STAR

Global Teenager Project coordinator Bob Hofman speaks to students at Sir Ernest Macmillan Public School via Skype from Amsterdam.

By: [Louise Brown](#) GTA, Education Schools, Published on Sat Jun 21 2014

It's not unusual for kids these days to have a classmate critique their work; teachers feel that by learning how to mark someone else, you learn what's important yourself.

But Grade 8 student Shiyannie Waran of Scarborough got more than just writing tips from a peer's comments on her recent essay about the Nigerian schoolgirl abductions. They came from a former Nigerian schoolgirl herself, now living in the Netherlands, who was editing Shiyannie's work using software designed by a University of Toronto professor. Call it marking without borders.

"I was shocked; she said she had a lot of friends and family there — like her grandmother — who are suffering and she thought I should put in more details about the abductions," said the Grade 8 student at Sir Ernest Macmillan Public School.

But her young overseas editor was also impressed that Shiyannie lives in rapper Drake's hometown — "She said she's a huge fan, too."

The international input Shiyannie received was part of a digital pilot project that lets students around the world give each other feedback on an assignment they have all tackled in their own classrooms. These international learning circles, called the [Global Teenager Project](#), have been letting students share research for years, but they have never had the tech tools to let them actually critique each other's work one-on-one — to give both praise and suggestions for improvement. The software, called Cogneeto, was designed by U of T psychology professor Steve Joordens, who modelled it after a computer program he designed for universities called [PeerScholar](#) that has been found to promote critical thinking by having students mark each other's work.

“It lets students exercise all those 21st-century skills people like (education guru) Michael Fullan talk about — critical thinking, collaboration, citizenship,” said Joordens, whose software has been sponsored by [Pearson Canada](#) for use in the Global Teenager Project.



The critiques are supposed to be anonymous, so students don't usually know the home country of their peer editor, although Shiyannie's Nigerian partner chose to volunteer her identity.

But one Scarborough class was horrified when one of their essays on the rights of homosexuals got poor marks from an unidentified student who argued that homosexuality is a mental disorder.

“I'm proud to live in a country where my students find homophobia inappropriate,” said teacher Laura Thompson, whose students at Sir Ernest Macmillan were largely captivated by the project — “and not just because my boys liked the looks of the girls from the Netherlands...”

“All schools do current events, but it's different when it's related to kids your own age and you get to learn about them,” said Thompson, whose class was one of four at the school that spent 13 weeks learning about children's rights with students from countries such as Ukraine, Hungary, Slovenia, Curacao, Romania and Lebanon.

“That's the big 'Aha!' moment — when they realize they're people like us, and except for an accident of geography or foreign policy, we're like them.”

