Golem, from Prague to Cyberspace: The Use of CSCL in Cultural Education for Diasporas

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we present, and provide the theoretical basis of, a computer supported and mediated educational research project which encourages cultural production and sustainability. We first describe the CD-Golem project which was developed in light of the perceived needs of a Diaspora community's attempts to impart its youth with a sense of belonging and continuity. Next, we characterize Cultural Education and discuss the theoretical rationale of our approach in the context of current theories of identity and cultural construction, multicultural education and computer-supported collaborative learning. We conclude by briefly reviewing and critically evaluating some of the lessons we have learned in our first years of activity.

Keywords:

Computer-Supported Collaborative Learning, Multicultural Education, Cultural Education, Diaspora, Technology and education, Ethnic Identity, Cultural Identity, Jewish Education.

INTRODUCTION

Given the enthusiastic use of computers to confront a variety of cognitive and pedagogical challenges in education (CTGV, 1993; Jonassen, 1994) we asked ourselves how these technologies could be employed in order to help minority cultural groups develop and sustain a sense of pride in their cultural heritage.

In this paper we describe and theorize about a computer supported and mediated educational research project which encourages cultural production and sustainability. We begin with a brief description of the CD-Golem project (Cultural Dimension Golem; http://cdgolem.huji.ac.il) that was developed in light of the perceived needs of a Diaspora community's attempts to impart its youth with a sense of belonging and continuity under less than optimal conditions. Next we discuss the theoretical rationale of our approach in the context of current theories of identity and cultural construction, multicultural education and computer-supported collaborative learning. We conclude by briefly reviewing some of the lessons we have learned in our first years of activity, and presenting some preliminary impressions gained from our ongoing monitoring and critical evaluation.

THE CD-GOLEM PROJECT

In an attempt to usher Cultural education into the world of computer-based learning, the CD-Golem was developed as an innovative educational and recreational website which serves Jewish schools worldwide. A combination of practical and theoretical concerns shaped our goals in designing the site. Practically speaking, we wanted to create activities in which children and youth would enjoy participating. We were confronted with the need to merge what we perceived to be the possible interests of Jewish schools and their students with our own ideas of educational efficacy in the realm of culture and identity. Theoretically, we wanted to create activities which would offer opportunities for ongoing communication on issues of culture and identity, along the lines of constructivist approaches grounded in Piagetian perspectives on reflective abstraction (Piaget, 1926) and Vygotskyan (Vygotsky, 1978) understandings of thought as the outcome of dialogical activity.

The CD-Golem site offers participants, 8-15 years of age, a variety of activities divided into four sections: "World of Writing", "Roots and Traditions"," World of Communities" and "Golem Challenges You". The "World of Writing" offers participants a wide range of opportunities to share with others their ideas related primarily to culture and identity. For example, they can engage in journalism through writing for the "Golem Gazette", author their own stories based on suggested themes (or on themes raised by the participants themselves) and offer interpretations of pictures related to a variety of socio-political issues. In the section on "Roots and Traditions", the participants are given the opportunity to build their own genealogical tree, by interviewing parents and gathering stories from relatives, and also to confront some dilemmas related to their communities' historical and religious traditions. The "World of Communities" allows participants to choose their own way to introduce themselves, their families, and their communities to the other members of the Golem worldwide community. Finally, "Golem Challenges You" is a section in which participants are afforded the opportunity to

take part in dramatized court cases, stimulating collaboration and argumentation towards cultural and ethical problem solving.

Participants in CD-Golem connect with one another through the Golem Communication Center which links students to bulletin boards, moderated discussion and chat groups, their personal e-mail, and 'ICQ-like' options. The site is facilitated and mediated by the Golem, a mythical polyglot cyber-persona, who functions as an 'educational agent or manager', navigating, supporting, motivating and challenging the participants throughout the program to think through and better elaborate their views regarding the ethical and value-laden issues raised in the diverse activities. The Golem can be thought of as one of the 'partners' in the Vygotskyan "Zone of Proximal Development" (Cole, 1996; Wertsch, 1985), encouraging and assisting participants in their evolving performance.

CD-Golem functions on a rather modest software of the type used by academic institutions for long-distance learning (i.e. WebCT) and clearly does not compete with the commercial sites developed for children activities and play. The site is loosely structured and its not presented as a curricular program. CD-Golem is suggested for use in Jewish schools and other informal educational settings, and it is only through these institutions that participants can join. The hope is that the site will encourage curricular integration by getting teachers involved in a variety of disciplines to collaborate in developing, together with the children, different aspects of an activity (i.e. teachers of history, social studies and Judaic studies may choose to collaborate on a global community activity). It is expected that peer interaction will further the co-construction of knowledge, while affording rewards that are intrinsic to the activity, thereby avoiding the problems of extrinsic rewards that dominate school activity. For example, participants have been encouraged to respond individually and cooperatively to current socio-political dilemmas such as the destruction of the Buddha statues by the Taliban or the anti-Semitic propaganda of Holocaust denial websites. Lastly, we hope for teachers in general and Jewish areas of study to recognize the potential of using a system which, in addition to its contents, offers intrinsic textual, computational, and linguistic literacy for students. The lingua franca of the system is English, although children can write in any language using Latin characters, and recently a Hebrew option has been also added.

In the three years of CD-Golem's operation approximately fifty schools in five continents and over 15 countries have steadily or periodically participated in the project. At this point there are 25 schools enrolled and participating at different levels of involvement.

CULTURAL EDUCATION

The CD-Golem project was envisioned as a cooperative community-university project: The community of Jews in Israel and the Diaspora, and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. CD-Golem was shaped for the benefit of both parties: the educational web environment was expected to offer valuable educational activities relevant to the realities of school life, and at the same time to provide rich data for educational research. All in all we wanted to attempt to bridge the gap between the practice of Cultural Education, theoretical advancements in the field of cultural and identity development, and the new educational technologies.

By Cultural Education (CE) we mean the educational efforts invested by minority groups who want to sustain what they perceive to be their socio-historical heritage [when confronted with the globalizing assimilatory power of an hegemonic West (Castells, 1997; Featherstone, 1995). Ethnic, religious, cultural or political minorities are not necessarily to be understood only in terms of relative numbers within a nation-state. Thus in Israel, where Jews are a numerical majority, current western globalizing trends can create a sense of minority for some Jewish groups present (Bekerman & Silverman, 1999; Kimmerling, 1993; Smooha, 1998).

Both concepts -- "Culture" and "Education" -- have histories, which for the most part have been forgotten. The terms have become independent, reified nouns in contrast to their processual, developmental, historicized meanings (Elias, 1998; Watt, 1997; Williams, 1961). This process of reification and fixation is part of the problem we are seeking to ameliorate. We find that the restoration of the developmental process embodied in these historically re-contextualized concepts constitutes a partial solution towards these same problems, as well as an educational model (Bekerman, in press-a).

Traditionally the basic humanities curriculum puts a great emphasis on classical philosophical inquiry, mostly from an idealistic perspective concerned with the nature of reality and problems of virtue in political educational contexts. It also envisions traditional textual literacy as the heart of cultural (in our case Jewish) production and maintenance. Finally, humanities curricula suggest a strong connection between traditional views of 'universal' humanism and traditional particularistic cultural worldviews. Textual learning in these settings has been presented in a dislocated and mostly de-historicized way, unsuccessfully engaging learners in interpretative practices that might make these texts relevant to their present contexts.

Cultural Education is geared to cultivate in members of culturally, economically, or politically oppressed groups a critical consciousness (McLaren, 1997; Nichols & Brown, 1996) of their situation as the foundation of their libratory praxis while

recognizing that their greatest enemy is the fatalistic belief in the inevitability and necessity of existing beliefs and structures.

The classic humanities curriculum implicitly (and partially explicitly) assumes certain modern understandings of concepts such as culture, identity, and education, which are associated with individual, cognitive, and autonomous activities. In the last decades, theoretical developments within the 'new' humanities and social sciences have led to a reexamination of cultural production and maintenance and the related issues of identity development, and educational theory and strategies (Giddens, 1991; Harre & Gillett, 1994; Holzman, 1997).

Thus our understanding of culture, identity and education (and related concepts such as language, power and memory) has undergone a shift from de-contextualized, ideal models to historicized, dialogically produced and transformed ones. Our focus has therefore shifted from the individual to the social arena and from the intra-psychological to the inter-psychological (Schwandt, 1998). The theoretical relocation into the social interactional sphere where historically situated participants calibrate their positions according to complex socio-cultural relations, has the potential to promote a re-thinking of educational aims and strategies (Bekerman, in press-b).

It is the curricular organization towards these aims and its resulting practices, which we call Cultural Education (CE). CE is geared towards the joint production of agents aware of historical processes, the interdependence of social phenomena, and the participation of a multiplicity of powers and interests in the shaping of present meanings. This awareness should allow agents to devise the strategies necessary for change (if change is indeed their goal), and to consider the feasibility of their implementation in the multiple arenas in which interested powers struggle for domination (educational institutions, media channels, political arenas, etc.). These are not uniquely Jewish educational challenges. They are salient for a multitude of other cultural groups which have suffered from western social, cultural, political, and or economic colonizing tendencies in the modern era.

CD-Golem reflects this educational approach in its activities which are constructed under the premise that culture has little to do with the habits we train people to adopt and has everything to do with the environments we build for people to inhabit (Varenne & McDermott, 1998). Culture and identity are approached as contexts. Not the ones into which one is placed, but context as a behavioral arena of which one is part. In short CD-Golem proposes that social interaction continuously produces culture and identity. CD-Golem approaches education as a social enterprise in which all individuals have an opportunity to contribute and to which all feel a responsibility (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

CULTURAL EDUCATION, MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION AND CSCL

Cultural Education departs from multicultural education in that it is particularistically bounded and aligns with it in that it wishes to strengthen tolerance and recognition towards multiple cultural forms enabling them to interact on equal bases in the public arena. Like multicultural approaches, Cultural Education is supportive of introducing to educational practice concepts related to content integration, knowledge construction and prejudice reduction (Banks, 1995).

Computer-Supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL) suits our aims to assist youth from a minority culture Diaspora to both achieve cultural sustainability and strengthen multicultural sensitivies. Our approach shares with CSCL constructivist perspectives, which emphasize an understanding of problem-based apprenticeship, situatedness, and distributive cognition (Duffy & Cunningham, 1996). The use of computers and the location of the project in the World Wide Web made it possible to render choices available for the content and directions of learning, to support collaborative learning between student peers and teachers, and to offer activities which would allow for different patterns in the organization of learning as well as afford widely dispersed Diaspora groups to sustain consistent synchronic and a-synchronic communication. The technology implemented promotes, by its mere existence, the boundedness of what was until now for the most part an "imagined community" (Anderson, 1991). We would like to suggest that CD-Golem is doing CSCCE (Computer-Supported Collaborative Cultural Education).

LESSONS LEARNED

The main goal of CD-Golem is to search for new and creative ways to develop a sense of belonging within an evolving cultural sphere while both sustaining a polisemic and multivalent perspective and promoting multicultural understanding and awareness (Ridley, Mendoza, & Kanitz, 1994).

When considering that from the start our aim was to implement the project not in a particular school or network of schools in a city but on a variety of educational institutions around the world it will surprise no one if we state that developing the project has been both challenging and frustrating. We had assumed that private schools would be technologically well-equipped, that the teachers of a Diaspora nation, with a powerful rhetorical tradition of unity, would welcome the opportunity to easily connect and sustain communication, and that private and public benefactors would readily support the introduction of new technologies in an educational setting they identified as an ideological imperative for the further evolution of their community. Soon we discovered these assumptions to be unrealistically optimistic. Although most

schools that joined the program had computer equipment, the equipment was mostly used to introduce students to computer literacy and was rarely integrated into other curricular areas. When integrated, computers played a role in high-status curricular tracks (mathematics, language, business), while Jewish educational areas, traditionally perceived as secondary in terms of expected academic achievements, were segregated from the general studies and particularly from computer support.

One of our first surprises came from the types of teachers who expressed an interest in participating in the project. They can be classified into three categories. In Israel and some non-English speaking Diaspora communities, the first to join were those teaching English as a second language. For them, CD-Golem became an opportunity to teach the language, not in the abstraction of a detached class, but in a context in which its use served real communicational purposes (i.e. pen pal correspondence or communicating with the Golem character). It became a welcomed opportunity to integrate cherished cultural activities into their language discipline without impeding ??? upon language development. The second category included computer lab teachers who welcomed the Golem as a project which offered the opportunity to add some substance to the rather bland technical learning they usually conducted in their computer literacy lessons. Last came the few Jewish educators who, aside from their work in a disciplinary area, were young computer 'freaks'. Many of these teachers proved to be short-term participants who found it difficult, in spite of their early enthusiasm, to relate to the educational issues raised and the educational approaches and learning perspectives offered by CD-Golem.

It was clear from the start that reaching what we had thought to be our first target, Jewish educators at large, would be no easy task. It soon became apparent from those who did join, that they had little familiarity with either the technologies or the theoretical approaches which supported the project. The on-line support system we had build for them soon proved to be of no help. It was clear that teachers unfamiliar with the technology could not and would not use that same tool to overcome their handicap. Ultimately we 'regressed' to the supposedly obsolete long distance telephone calls and, wherever possible, on-site visits became the central tools of training and support. Overcoming this obstacle was not enough. The learning approach and the theoretical perspectives regarding the constructive and dialogical aspects of culture and identity, on which CD-Golem is grounded, proved difficult to grasp for our school partners. In many instances we had reports of teachers downloading activities from the site to use them, transformed into hard copies, in regular classes, derailing our efforts to encourage synchronic or a-synchronic communicational activity. For the most part, teachers used CD-Golem in class in ways which did not encourage collaborative work. They preferred activities which could be done individually, i.e. writing to Golem, answering a quiz.

Most of the problems mentioned above have been well documented in recent research (CTGV, 1996; Harris, 1995; Siegel, 1995; Witmer, 1998). We are forced to recognize that in spite of the two decades or more since the introduction of technologies into school life, the new technologies are still difficult to adapt to traditional educational paradigms. The situation is more acute in 'low status' educational fields such as, in our case, Jewish education.

We have encountered other challenges to our project. Some are ideological and others of a more technical nature. Though the CD-Golem is offered as a tool which can potentially strengthen ties between the Jewish community worldwide, present ideological perspectives, which emphasize the centrality of Israel for the Jewish world (Cohen, 1991) seem to prevent teachers from experimenting with the Golem system to create ties between schools within a Diaspora community or among Diaspora communities themselves (for example, to create a local network among the schools presently participating in Mexico City, or to attempt communication between schools in England and Argentina).

Global Jewish dispersion also brings about serious scheduling problems which schools find difficult to overcome. Indeed, communicating between Los Angeles and Israel could mean having children in Los Angeles working at eight o'clock in the morning and those in Israel at six o'clock in the afternoon -- a time when schools are regularly closed. True, the technology is not school dependent and it could be possible to create the connection between students working from home. However, this would depend upon participating students owning relevant equipment, and a coordinated school effort to generate student commitment to the program outside of school hours. At present we are struggling to find creative solutions to these problems.

The students, for their part, seem to participate in activities mostly when encouraged to do so by their teachers. There has been little participation by students outside of school activity in the privacy of their homes though they each hold a personal password which would allow them to access the system from anywhere. Reviewing the activity logs, it becomes apparent that the participants prefer activities which directly relate to their own experiences rather than engaging in activities dealing with issues of a social or political nature. Thus an activity which called upon students to choose an animal they would enjoy becoming for a day and to render an explanation for their choice, produced a rather large amount of responses (a total of 70 messages, over a month), while discussion activities around issues such us 'Should the Israeli Defense Forces retreat from Lebanon?' or 'Can the Taliban be justified for destroying the Buddha statues?' attracted very little participation (ten to fifteen responses each). The animal activity included a second stage in which students were asked to suggest which animal would better represent the Jewish people; this stage of the activity also produced few responses.

CD-Golem offers an opportunity to contact other children around the world. Corresponding with participants through personalized e-mail accounts offered by the system is one way of achieving this aim. This correspondence reinforces the ideological discourse of Jewish education that cherishes the strengthening of a worldwide Jewish community. Yet pen pal activities have not been easy to develop. They have primarily succeeded on the 'school in Diaspora' to 'school in Israel' track. As of yet, no contacts between different schools in Diaspora or between schools in Israel have developed. The contacts are usually initiated by teachers who were personally interested in encouraging the students and asked us to establish the necessary connections to support the correspondence. Once the connections were established, they produced a rather large amount of e-mail exchanges (over 100 and over 70 in two separate occasions during the span of three months of activity). Still, the contents of the exchange between students were limited to short biographical statements with little follow-up activity.

One of the dilemma activities offered dealt with the need to decide who, out of two critically ill, hospitalized patients who are in urgent need of a very rare blood type transfusion will receive the only blood portion which Adam can offer. One belongs to Adam's community, whereas the other is a stranger. Participants in this activity were happy to express their views and react to Golem's messages challenging their statements (over forty messages were exchanged with the students in one of the participating classes). However, students have yet to engage in research to further substantiate their positions, even though links to knowledge-enriching sites are made available.

There was a fair amount of participation in activities related to festivals and traditions (six schools participated on different occasions), and the information submitted was relatively richer in content than other activity responses, due to the overlap between the activity's content and the contents taught in regular classroom sessions.

Apparently the activities undertaken by teachers and students mostly reflect the present, traditional assumptions of what constitutes Jewish education. Festival-related work and networking with Israeli Jewish youth are teacher-preferred activities because they fall within the boundaries of traditional perceptions of Jewish education. Political and social issues, on the other hand, seem less attractive since they do not fit traditional conceptions of what constitutes the purview of Jewish educators. Students choose to become involved mostly with issues which engage them on a personal, experiential level, but even then only within the limits of school activities. The students' limited type of involvement also reflects current compartmentalizing conceptions of Jewish education. Readily engaging in festival and root-type activities, students will make no apparent effort to engage in socio-political issues which might not be perceived as belonging to the field of Jewish study, nor will they invest in widening their present scope of knowledge by voluntarily accessing outside resources.

In spite of the rather gloomy picture, we remain enthusiastic. In the last three years, both the amount of participants and the levels of participation have steadily grown. From a modest start with six schools and one hundred and fifty participants, we are now working with twenty-five schools and almost one thousand registered members.

We have learned much in the few years of the project's operation, and much more has yet to be understood for CD-Golem to achieve its aim. It becomes more and more apparent that for technology to foster collaborative learning and cross-disciplinary critical exploration, we may have to help more actively educators and students rethink their paradigms regarding relevant educational contents and applications, in light of communal needs and the expanding temporal and spatial boundaries of Cultural Education perspectives, while also looking for new ways to assess student and teachers performance (Means & Olson, 1994). New technologies may not, all by themselves, have the power to help minorities overcome the basic cultural and educational premises which control them. When uncritically used, they might even help the process of social reproduction. For new technologies to become liberating educational tools they are in need of accounting for the wider interpretative contexts within which they function. Anderson (1991) highlighted the interrelationship between systems of cultural production, productive relations, and communicational technologies when trying to better understand the processes of nation development. The use of new technologies in education in general, and our specific interest in the use of these technologies to benefit minorities interested in sustaining their socio-historical heritage, call for serious research efforts along these lines.

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