

# Different Achievement in Online Oral History

Jason B. Ellis, Amy S. Bruckman

Georgia Institute of Technology  
{jellis, asb}@cc.gatech.edu

## ABSTRACT

The Internet has made it possible to incorporate adult mentors in the classroom in ways that it would have been difficult or impossible to do previously. As we move forward with such projects, it is important for us to consider what these adults contribute to the learning process. Palaver Tree Online is an online community that supports kids interviewing elders to build up a shared database of oral history. In this paper, we give a brief overview of two case studies of kids in Palaver Tree. In addition, we propose a new role for adults in aiding students having difficulty.

## Keywords

Online community, oral history, children, adults, elders

## INTRODUCTION

Projects like Foxfire (Wigginton 1985) have shown that oral history can provide opportunities for deep learning by connecting students with real people who have stories to tell. It is our hypothesis that students can gain a new perspective on history through these kinds of interviews with elders. Certainly, many elders have life stories to share. However what specifically students take away from such discussions with elders is unclear.

Palaver Tree Online is a constructionist (Papert 1991) online community aimed at exploring this issue. In Palaver Tree Online, kids interview elders and use what they learned to create online artifacts that share the stories with the world. Through two brief case studies, this paper contrasts the experiences of two groups of students in Palaver Tree Online during its use in a middle school classroom during the 2000-2001 school year. We give a brief overview of a more successful case followed by a less successful one and suggest a new role for elders in scaffolding the teacher in helping less productive students improve their work.

## PALAVAR TREE ONLINE

A Palaver tree is a West African tree that serves as the center of a village. It is a place where elders come to share their life stories and a place where the community comes to listen. Our aim is to create an online space that honors this tradition – a place where kids can hear history from primary sources.

The design of Palaver Tree Online (PTO) is based on three years of work in classrooms doing e-mail oral history (Ellis, Bruckman et al. 1999). One of the most important lessons we learned in this early work is that we are scaffolding a complex social process that involves students, teachers, and elders. Teachers need a way to recruit elders to work with their classes and manage their students online. We need to provide a comfortable place for elders to share their stories and other personal information online. Finally, we need to support kids taking the stories they hear from elders and creating online artifacts based on them. We call these artifacts PalaverStories.

We used the lessons learned from our e-mail studies to design PTO – a client interface and server infrastructure that aims to help the process of online oral history go more smoothly for all involved. The software helps carry through our interaction model and supports the roles of kids, teachers, and elders (Ellis and Bruckman 2001).

## CASE STUDY OVERVIEW

We studied the use of Palaver Tree Online in one 8<sup>th</sup> grade Georgia History class over the course of six weeks. There were 21 students in the class and they worked in groups of two, with one group of one. Students visited the computer lab once or twice per week during the study. Each visit lasted one hour. We did extensive classroom observation, pre and post interviews with the kids and teacher, a student focus group, and student and elder surveys. We did post interviews with several elders as well.

Before getting started with PTO, students were assigned to read the Civil Rights chapter in their Georgia history textbook. They then spent a day in class brainstorming questions for elders. The first day in the lab, students reviewed discussions and PalaverStories from prior classes. The second day, each group of students was assigned an elder to interview, read the elder's profile, and posted initial questions for the elder.

Interviews consisted of a question and answer session between one elder and a group of kids over the course of two weeks (four sessions). After this, kids began work on their PalaverStories while many continued their discussions with elders for an additional two weeks (four sessions). Finally, each group made their projects available for feedback from elders and other kids. Feedback occurs in an anchored discussion (Guzdial 1997) that has the group's project as its focus. Kids spent the next two sessions giving each other feedback and reading the feedback they received from elders. A few groups made revisions to their PalaverStories based on elder feedback.

Our recent work has examined two groups of kids using PTO in detail: a more successful case and a less successful case. As there is not room here to give specifics on the cases, we will discuss them at a high level. In Case 1, students asked

questions based on the elder's profile, heard stories about the elder's life, and created a PalaverStory that captured what they learned in a narrative that showed synthesis. In Case 2, students started in the same way but were never able to focus their interview questions to the same degree as the students in Case 1. The kids' follow-up questions showed little reflection on the elder's previous responses and the discussion got into little depth on Civil Rights. Just as they got further and further away from the subject matter at hand in their interview discussion, the PalaverStory created by these kids starts out well but gets confused and off-topic later.

Mid-way through project in Case 2, the teacher's intervention was needed. Due to the volume of messages, however, the teacher was unable to review the discussions at the level of detail required to detect these breakdowns on a regular basis. On the other hand, the elder simply tried to answer student questions to the best of his ability and may perhaps have felt that offering direction to the students would have been overstepping his bounds. How, then, do we aid teachers and elders in detecting and assisting students that are having difficulty?

Although there are numerous interviews going on, each of these is home to one elder. Perhaps, then, there is a role for the elder in identifying problematic discourses and alerting the teacher – a role similar to the One Sky, Many Voices staff members that monitor discussions (Lee and Songer 1999). Once an elder detects a problem, we could provide a mechanism for that elder to indicate the specific place in Palaver Tree that the teacher might want to pay special attention to. This would prompt the teacher to review the discussion and decide what (if any) intervention is necessary. Of course, for this scenario to work, elders must be keenly aware of what the students need to be doing in order to succeed, as O'Neill found in the CoVis Mentor Database (O'Neill, Abeygunawardena et al. 2000).

## CONCLUSION

The Internet has made it possible to incorporate adults in the classroom in ways that it would have been difficult or impossible to do previously. As we move forward with such projects, it is important for us to consider what these adults contribute to the learning process and how we might scaffold this process. Here, we have briefly presented two case studies of students and adults working together online and described a new role for elders in the learning process. By connecting kids with adults eager to share their knowledge and encouraging students to explore interests in an appropriate framework, we believe educators can create important new learning experiences. For more detail on this work, see the project website at <http://www.cc.gatech.edu/elc/palaver/>

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank the teachers, kids and elders that have participated in this and previous studies of Palaver Tree Online. Generous financial support for this work is provided by Intel and IBM.

## REFERENCES

- Ellis, J. B. and A. S. Bruckman (2001). Designing Palaver Tree Online: Supporting Social Roles in a Community of Oral History. *Proceedings of Computer-Human Interaction 2001*. Seattle, WA: 474-481.
- Ellis, J. B., A. S. Bruckman, et al. (1999). Children and Elders Sharing Stories: Lessons from Two Online Oral History Projects. *Proceedings of Computer-Supported Collaborative Learning 1999*. Stanford, CA: 151-158.
- Guzdial, M. (1997). Information ecology of collaborations in educational settings: Influence of tool. *Proceedings of CSCL 97*. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: 83-90.
- Lee, S.-Y. and N. B. Songer (1999). How Does Electronic Discourse Support Students' Scientific Inquiry In An Internet-Enhanced Collaborative Learning Environment? *Annual Meeting of the AERA*. Montreal, Canada.
- O'Neill, D. K., H. Abeygunawardena, et al. (2000). *The Telementor's Guidebook: A field manual for supporting inquire on-line*, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto: 61.
- Papert, S. (1991). *Situating Constructionism*. Constructionism. I. Harel and S. Papert. Norwood, NJ, Ablex Publishing.
- Wigginton, E. (1985). *Sometimes a Shining Moment: The Foxfire Experience*. Garden City, NY, Anchor Books.