

## **Come\_IN@Palestine: Adapting a German Computer Club Concept to a Palestinian Refugee Camp**

Kai Schubert, Konstantin Aal, Volker Wulf, Anne Weibert, University of Siegen, 57068 Siegen, Germany,  
{kai.schubert, konstantin.aal, volker.wulf, anne.weibert}@uni-siegen.de

Meryem Atam, International Institute for Socio Informatics (IISI), Stiftsgasse 25, 53111 Bonn, Germany,  
meryem\_atam@web.de

George P. Yerosus, Birzeit University, PO Box 14, Birzeit, West Bank, Palestine,  
gyerosus@birzeit.edu

**Abstract:** The come\_IN computer club is an approach to foster learning and integration in intercultural neighborhoods of Germany. We have tried to adapt this concept to a different part of the world: a Palestinian refugee camp. Similar to intercultural German neighborhoods, refugee camps are also the result of migration moves, however, in this case of an enforced one. Our findings indicate a successful adaptation of the approach to a Palestinian context.

### **Introduction**

The intercultural computer clubs, called *come\_IN*, offer a place to share practices among children and adults of diverse ethnical backgrounds. Once a week the participants voluntarily gather in the computer club, work on joint projects, study, play, or realize individual ideas supported by the use of information and communication technology (ICT). Together the participants are creating personal meaningful artifacts to express themselves (Schubert & Weibert 2012). These situated and shared practices are apt to develop an effect on an individual as well as on a community level (Veith et al. 2009). Via computer supported project work the club participants can establish new social contacts, learn about the ideas of the other participants – within their own and from different cultures. Since 2003 we have built a network of come\_IN intercultural computer clubs in Germany (Schubert et al. 2011). The main goal of this work is to investigate into the transfer of our experiences from the German context and adapt it to the specific needs of Palestinian refugee camps and their inhabitants. Through the use and appropriation of ICT these marginalized Palestinian refugee communities can positively engage into their own society and in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict-to-peace transformation process. Another major objective to transfer our approach and to build a network of computer clubs among refugee camps is to network Palestinians across different sites, at the same time promoting their integration into the local societies and finally enabling their access to the information society.

### **State of the Art**

The concept of the come\_IN computer clubs follows the tradition of computer clubhouses in the US. The first of these computer clubhouses was established for underprivileged youth in Boston in the year 1993; the principles of situated, collaborative learning and constructionist thinking offered them opportunities to express themselves with the use of ICT and new media (Kafai 2009). The pedagogical concept behind the clubhouses is an extension of the constructivist-learning paradigm, known as constructionism (Papert 1980). The come\_IN approach developed this concept further, applying it to issues of inter-generational learning and the integration of migrant communities in Germany. The computer clubs were based in schools, which serve a central point of exchange among the people of the city district, to provide opportunities for elementary school kids, their parents and tutors to engage in group-oriented project work. The digital divide between the students in a refugee camp and those outside is obvious. The term “digital divide” was defined by Mehra (2004) as “the troubling gap between those who use computers and the Internet and those who do not.” To narrow this digital gap and empower the students in the refugee camp Sawhney (2009) hosted over three years several workshops about storytelling in Palestine. Storytelling can also be used to work through intractable conflicts; this enables people with traumatic social experiences to digest these experiences and learn to live with the happenings. Bar-On (2004) demonstrated with a Palestinian-Israeli group that storytelling could help to handle painful events.

### **Jalazone: A Palestinian Refugee Camp in the West Bank**

Jalazone is a Palestinian refugee camp in the West Bank approx. 7 km north of Ramallah. Like most of the other refugee camps Jalazone was established in 1949. The inhabitants of the camp were expelled or fled from their homes in nowadays Israel. A high population density as well as crowded and precarious living conditions characterizes the camp. The unemployment rate is at a very high level (40% compared to the average of 20 % in the entire West Bank). The council running the camp estimates that approx. 30% of the families have Internet access at home. There are also some Internet cafés. These places have a bad reputation since they were rarely controlled by adults and considered to be used for computer gaming, gambling, and pornography watching.

## Research Methods

Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was chosen as a theoretical framework to be grounded in the field. Also we adhere to principles of Participatory Action Research by Kemmis & McTaggart (2004) regarding the question “how to act in the field”. With this approach we as authors were part of the field to investigate meaningful, field-oriented insights. We conducted the research presented in this paper over a period of 28 months, from May 2010 to September 2012. The first visits were documented via field notes and photos. Extensive documentations were written every evening of the respective day. At the last visit an accredited translator was part of the research team, so it was possible to do workshops and interviews in Arabic with the tutors, the children and inhabitants of the refugee camp. During our last stay in August and September 2012 we conducted 7 semi-structured interviews (with durations between 30 minutes and 3 hours) and more than ten informal interviews, almost all of them were audio recorded. Additionally protocols from the weekly computer club sessions written by the tutors and other materials have been collected.

## Discussion and Conclusion

While the *come\_IN* approach itself was inspired by Resnick’s (1996) work, it was yet another stretch to move this socio-technical approach to learning and social integration to a Palestinian context. The challenge was to share insights gained in Germany while adapting the socio-technical concept to the different context. We assumed that our publications and written materials would only provide limited insights into our experiences made during almost ten years of project work. Therefore, we very much believed in an exchange of expertise among the partners at different points in time. Different members of the German project team spent substantial amounts of time in understanding the local context and preparing for the clubs opening. Moreover, we invited the Palestinian project manager for one week to Germany to make him see the computer clubs in action. In the West Bank, we have decided to work with a local university, Birzeit, to build the club, which adds a second university player into the support structure. While they coordinate the local activities and engage undergraduate students to tutor the club, their social attribution in the camp is quite distinct. In future visits we want to evaluate the further development of the computer club and its participants within and outside the refugee camp. To become a network the opening of further computer clubs within the West Bank is planned as a long term perspective.

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