

Online Learning and Community Cohesion: Linking School, 2013. By Roger Austin & Bill Hunter. Routledge, Publisher. 180 pages. ISBN 978-0-415-51028-8

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Introduction

This book examines whether, and how, communications technologies are being used in six different developed countries to reduce prejudice and increase citizenship and social cohesion among school-aged students. By taking this perspective, the book departs from much of the literature on educational uses of ICT which, as these authors note, tends rather to focus on identifying cognitive learning outcomes from ICT use in schools. Nevertheless, the broader rhetoric around technology both inside and outside of education has long claimed that ICT can increase democracy and social connectedness (notably Harasim, 2000 in education) and positive intercultural exchanges (e.g. O'Dowd, 2007). This book examines the reality of these more general claims for ICT effectiveness and asks how much of the enormous investment of money and time made by governments in growing ICT use in schools has been focused on growing citizenship education? The value of this book lies in the comprehensive and thoughtful review of what is actually happening at an international and national level in this area. The authors present the wide range of data they observed and compiled across six very diverse national contexts. Further, because their focus is at the national level the book also contains brief historical backgrounds of intercultural tensions and issues within each of the countries described. These historical frameworks are both helpful and interesting and encourage the reader to ponder the huge social challenges represented within each of these contexts.

Content Organization

The book contains an introductory chapter which lays out the theoretical frameworks and strategies for how the authors are interpreting the data they compiled from individual countries, and a common standard by which to compare how each country used (or did not use) ICT for community building between schools and across social boundaries. The authors' central comparative theory is a "pre-internet" model from Social Psychology that frames their work; Allport's Contact Hypothesis. This claims that contact between groups would reduce prejudice if four conditions were met: that there was equal status between those groups in the contact situation; there was a common goal for the contact; there was intergroup cooperation and that this contact was supported by authority, law or custom. Using this framework and some of its later modifications to analyze their research, the authors then present six chapters that each focus

on a different western country or group of countries: Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, Israel, England, Europe, Canada, and the United States. The final chapter thoughtfully highlights some of the findings in relation to future promise and the many challenges remaining. Overall the book is characterized by a thoughtful reflectiveness about the potential of communications technology for an increasingly important kind of citizenship development.

Brief Synopsis of Chapters

Chapter 1: Introduction: Communication technologies and positive social change

This chapter sets the conceptual framework for the rest of the book, starting with the understanding that generally, governments expect schools to provide a level of enculturation beyond simply academic skills, which currently goes under the name of citizenship education. Part of that citizenship process can involve bringing students from diverse backgrounds together to promote greater social and inter-group understanding. With the rise of the internet, the possibilities of connecting students from different cultures across classroom and national boundaries became possible, and an awareness of the importance of long-term contact across cultural boundaries, particularly evident in sites of long term differences such as Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, became more prominent. However, online contact is clearly a double-edged sword—both enabling potentially greater community, while providing new contexts for negative social interaction such as cyberbullying. The authors wanted to understand more deeply whether, and how, communication technologies have been used to help young people develop a more inclusive sense of community, and particularly within locations that have been sites of religious or cultural struggle.

This analysis is framed within a theoretical conception of the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954) and its more recent formulations. Originally Allport's contact hypothesis suggested that with greater amount of contact between members of different groups, there was less evidence of prejudicial views about the other group as long as the four conditions described earlier were met. This conception was the subject of considerable research over the next 50 years or so and newer formulations (like Pettigrew's 1998 model) have elaborated the various necessary conditions resulting in a more complex model. However, this elaborated model has additionally been criticized for limiting the focus of intercultural awareness only to issues of individual knowledge and change, while ignoring larger, more systemic societal pressures that perpetuate racial and ethnic divisions. Despite the controversies around the model, substantial research on social identity and individuation effects (SIDE), which takes into account both psychological and sociological perspectives, suggests that creating new groups, particularly using communications technologies, may encourage the creation of new, cross-boundary communications that may be more inclusive and provide a space for reassessment of previous prejudicial views. The authors argue that certain "deliberative" school initiatives to increase contact between diverse and conflicted groups may have the power to support positive attitude change and are worth investigating. In addition, they argue for the importance of the teacher's role, and for deeper examination of teacher professional development that includes support for the development of intercultural competence. The role of the teacher, along with analysis of each case in terms of how it implements the contact hypothesis and the impact on teachers and students, are the common analytic questions brought to bear on the subsequent nation-based case studies that make up the substance of the book. The case studies themselves are examples of national

initiatives, rather than global initiatives. Many current global ICT-based initiatives, such as iEARN, Global Schoolnet and the Flat Classroom project, to name but a few, are funded largely by private corporations, like Microsoft, Cisco or Google, and have been subject to less extensive external evaluation, although they are engaged in by large numbers of schools, teachers and students. The authors have chosen to focus instead on national initiatives, and those that have been motivated to greater or lesser degrees by the contact hypothesis and for which substantive data exists on their implementation and evaluation.

Chapter 2: Northern Ireland & the Republic of Ireland

Two major projects are described in this chapter, the first, the European Studies program started in the 1980's linking students in Ireland and Great Britain, and the second, the Dissolving Boundaries program linking Northern and Southern Ireland begun in 1999 and continuing today. Both have shown significant positive impact in student appreciation of intercultural differences. Important goals of the ongoing Dissolving Boundaries program are its inclusivity in regard to age and socio-economic groups. Schools in all neighbourhoods and across the primary-secondary spectrum were included. Further, to increase participation among students with special needs they used video-conferencing as the communicating technology platform, so that interaction did not depend on writing. Finally, schools were paired on each side of the border and maintained a consistent contact between particular schools over time. In addition, there was a clear commitment from the teachers involved and considerable professional development and support for those teachers. Ongoing data collection includes case studies, questionnaires, formal evaluations by external government bodies on both sides of the border, and results have also become published research papers. Overall, the results are noteworthy with clear support from all those stakeholders involved in the process. While modest funding continues, and despite the successes, this project, disappointingly, seems to remain a peripheral rather than a central governmental concern—a finding that will echo in later chapters of the book.

Chapter 3: Israel

Israel presents an interesting case as it has long been a highly technologically advanced country as well as being a country “in conflict”. The three main cultural segments in Israel are secular Jews, religious Jews and Arabs, although there are many more subdivisions within each of these groups. Educationally, there has been a long history of online cybermeetings since the 1990's, and a great number of smaller projects have been funded since that time. These can be seen as comprising 4 different types of project models (Maoz, 2011): co-existence projects (aiming at mutual tolerance and the reduction of stereotyping); joint projects (working together on a common superordinate goal); confrontational model projects (directly discussing the roots of conflict between groups) and narrative storytelling models (sharing personal and collective narratives to achieve reconciliation). One of the most interesting aspects of this chapter, I found, was the centrality of the collaborative learning model in the Teacher Education system. A central aim of teacher education is to use ICT (which is also very consistently and coherently built into all teacher education programming) to promote dialogue across groups. The TEC center itself is a collaborative program across three diverse teacher education colleges that each represent one of the 3 main cultural groups. The mission of the TEC centre is to build trust through the use of collaborative online environments (although the interactions have both face to face and online components). They work with four main groups: academic staff and students in teacher

education colleges, and teachers and students in schools who collaborate on educational projects. The chapter describes various specific initiatives and the successes that have been achieved and the challenges that continue to appear—for example resistance from Orthodox schools and colleges opposed to mixed-gender online collaboration, or concerns of Arab students who faced language barriers and feared unequal treatment. Each new problem is considered and adjustments made and the TEC centre has become a sustainable institution that continues to build on its successful 8 year history interweaving innovative uses of ICT to support the growth of intercultural understanding throughout teacher education and schools. This is particularly heartening at a time when intercultural understanding daily seems to become ever more necessary, and is also one of the most “successful” contexts in the book, that recognize the problem the book reflects on and further, are extensively using ICT to support remediation.

Chapter 4: England

The chapter on England is an interesting example of a country where there has been both a lack of a specifically educational perspective on the issue of intercultural understanding within the country, and a lack of use of ICT as a potential communication medium for citizenship education. The authors trace an historical picture of why this situation may have developed. The historical overview in the chapter on England identifies the key issue of parallel lives in the ethnic divisions that characterize English society. The extent of the “ethnic polarization” (Burgess & Harris, 2011) in English schools continues today, where most white students attend majority white schools and most non-white students attend majority non-white schools, and largely reflects parental decisions to choose the type of school their children attend. Such polarization continues, even though there is greater cultural integration within neighbourhoods outside of schools. The authors conclude that parental rights to choose continue to take precedence over issues such as community cohesion. Despite a number of serious social issues, including several race riots in the three decades after 1970, anxiety about potentially disaffected Muslim youth in the wake of 9-11, and awareness of the socio-economic disadvantages of many immigrant families, the UK never developed a clear national policy of multiculturalism, except in specific local situations where immediate tensions were particularly damaging. Instead the government appears to have taken a perspective on “citizenship education” that primarily reflects security considerations rather than an attempt to develop greater social understanding through education. The result has been that curricular changes to promote “living together in the UK” were imposed in a somewhat narrow manner that differs from the way multiculturalism is thought about popularly, in Canada, for example. The separateness of ethnic populations within schools was further exacerbated by the growth of “faith” schools, supported by a variety of recent government legislative changes. The main response to the separate lives issue has been the development of a number of very recent school linking efforts culminating in the School Linking Network which has explicitly been charged with improving community cohesion through adopting a specifically intercultural rather than multicultural approach. Multiculturalism can appear to accentuate differences among social groups, because it supports a more passive acceptance of other groups, whereas an intercultural approach, which also characterizes the European initiatives described in Chapter 5, actively encourages interaction and dialogue among different groups and the development of tolerance through understanding. However, the mono-cultural nature of schooling in the UK remains, and so efforts at improving intercultural dialogue are aimed at communications between schools that represent different ethnic groups. While achieving some success, results suggest that such initiatives needed to be sustained for longer to

allow more positive effects to develop. Additionally most of those intercultural communication efforts were in-person, rather than ICT-supported initiatives. Where the authors noted ICT communications were being used in UK schools was as a means to connect to diverse groups in other countries, including Europe. In the UK, government viewed ICT in schools almost solely as a curriculum support for cognitive aspects of learning and as skills contributing to more general societal economic outcomes. It is not clear what might motivate any change in this policy approach, in part, because the recent decentralization of UK education to local authority control, may fragment any national efforts to use ICT for more general issues of cultural understanding.

Chapter 5: Europe and the issue of multiculturalism versus interculturalism

While both the UK and Ireland are part of Europe and the European Union, there are specific initiatives, particularly the eTwinning program that are unique in the scope of using technology to connect schools. ETwinning is currently the largest program of its kind worldwide and while it is managed nationally, it involves nearly 90,000 schools in 31 countries, and yet only about 3% of all teachers in the participating countries are involved. Growing from the aftermath of the WWII, there was a growing interest in what the authors term “the idea of Europe” –a kind of supra-ordinate sense of identity extending beyond individual national identities. The chapter traces key historical forces and earlier ICT educational initiatives, such as the Comenius programme which have given rise to the more recent eTwinning program. The key features of how this program operates reflect comparable values to those in the Contact Hypothesis approach, namely that school contacts should be of longer duration and that they should involve cooperative rather than competitive activities. However, the European efforts are based in theoretical frames (including Piagetian) different from the Contact Hypothesis, and explicitly employ an intercultural approach that emphasizes the role of interaction and, in this case, the use of technology to facilitate such communications and to help students increase their “cultural capital” in terms of understanding others to reach a greater understanding of both what they may have in common and what may be diverse.

Different from the Dissolving Boundaries program described in Chapter 2 on Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland where schools are matched, eTwinning participation is teacher-driven by teachers registering on the portal, describing the kind of projects they would be interested in and finding other teachers with similar interests. Once matched, the teachers have free access to the portal and ICT infrastructure. From a professional development perspective, courses are offered to teachers as part of a Europe-wide professional network, as well as at the national level, with a great deal of thought being put into the competencies needed for these initiatives to be successful, although there is a lot of variability in the amount of professional development in which teachers engage. Results from this project showed that students developed a greater sense of European identity along with demonstrating improvements in teaching and learning. Sadly, there is also concern that positive effects may not continue because funding has ceased although other initiatives may evolve. This case is unique because of its sheer size of the community it represents and result do show it is possible to organize and implement effective ICT projects across such a large and complex entity, and further, it has spurred potentially productive discussion about how teacher professional development can be designed to better support such initiatives.

Chapter 6: Canada

Nationally, Canada has adopted a multicultural approach to diversity, that tends to emphasize tolerance of cultural difference. Canada's history and sheer size of country has contributed to the great number of immigration waves from different cultures and groups, and to the particular divisions that characterize the country. While most immigration tends to concentrate in large urban centres, there are also widely dispersed rural communities. However, the size and dispersed population has resulted in very high levels of ICT connectivity, shown in educational contexts through organizations like Contact North which connects schools in Northern Canada, and a variety of significant different educational projects in many different provinces, which have an educational focus but may have both social and educational effects. One example is the WEIR project (Owen & Owsten, 1998) where professional writers were virtually connected with schoolchildren as a means of improving writing, but which additionally resulted in significant changes in students' sense of national and personal identity. Other more socially-focused ICT initiatives are described in the chapter such as the cdpeace schools initiative, but the authors explain the relative lack of these initiatives in this very technologically connected country as a consequence of the nature of the Canadian "brand" of multiculturalism. They suggest that Canada has largely avoided the level of overt internal group conflict that has characterized many of the other countries in the cases studied and thus has not had to confront problems of community cohesion in the same way. Additionally, education is a provincial concern in Canada, and this also reduces the likelihood of finding large scale Pan-Canadian initiatives. The result has been fewer projects where ICT has been an instrumental part of educational initiatives supporting intercultural understanding. Instead, like the UK, most ICT-related initiatives in Canadian education are focused on curriculum objectives and media literacy.

Chapter 7: The United States

While the US like the UK and Canada devolves many aspects of education policy to regional (state, county or province) control, the federal government plays a clear role in shaping national educational policies, such as the No Child Left Behind (2001) initiative, as well as efforts at protecting rights for potentially disadvantaged groups, including bilingual education and early childhood education. The historical section of this chapter is entitled Segregation, Desegregation and Re-segregation and vividly describes the cycles of change characterizing recent US history and reasons for the lack of Federal attempts to really focus on solving existing intergroup internal conflicts. Like the UK, the majority of schools have evolved as single ethnicity institutions, and initiatives such as Charter schools have, like the Faith schools in the UK, contributed to the segregation within schools along ethnic lines. More recently there have been government efforts at desegregating schools, but research (Orfield, 2012) suggests that even though communities outside schools may become more integrated, segregation may move to the class level within schools through ability or other kinds of tracking processes. While there have been a variety of attempts to improve this situation in schools, the underlying motivation seems to be academic rather than social. The authors, in fact, find no ICT projects that tried to bring together diverse communities in US schools. However, this is largely because such initiatives favour direct contact between students instead, particularly connecting diverse groups of students together in the same school building. This is probably a more effective strategy given the particular history of difference and the way schools have become stratified in the US. There are however, many instances of ICT projects, linking US students with other cultures, outside the

US, such as the Global Schoolhouse, the ePals network and the Flat classroom project. Pertinent for this discussion is the Flat classroom's "Eracism" project—a location for authentic, intercultural global debate about important issues about racism. Thus, community connections between schools in the US and in other countries seems to characterize the predominant way the US is choosing to take up many ICT-related projects that have a social, community cohesion intent, rather than using ICT in schools as a way to focus on nationally internal division issues the authors set out to study.

Chapter 8: The promise of online contact: Summary and the future

Here the authors try to pull together the various strands of this book and make a claim for the value and utility of using ICT as a way to increase contact between diverse groups and improve community cohesion. Despite the limited examples of where ICT is used this way to date, they still argue that ICT offers practical advantages for this kind of important work. Particularly, that ICT can save on travel time and transportation costs, bypass potential safety issues in areas where conflict is greater, and also allows for increased contact over sustained periods of time—one of the necessary conditions for the contact hypothesis to produce results. However, the research they presented suggests that governments generally tend to view the educational value of ICT only in terms of its contribution to academic achievement and economic competitiveness leaving it unclear whether political efforts will, in fact, ever be substantially directed toward these social uses of technology within education.

Each of the national cases offers a feasibility study that shows benefits for both teacher and student participants in the development of greater inter-group understanding and awareness, even though the number of these initiatives within each country is relatively small. Additionally, such projects provided a context for the teachers involved to learn more about educational technology uses and contributed to changes in their views on teaching and learning. The chapter ends by acknowledging the rapidly changing nature of the political and technological landscape, citing the rapid development of social media tools and their role in influencing social change, which, they suggest, offers hope for future growth in the use of ICT in education for social ends.

Summary

The scope of the book makes it a very interesting read, as it paints a picture of cultural diversity and the role ICT currently plays in education historically contextualized within each of the case studies. I found the paucity of ICT supported efforts to increase community and positive citizenship connections initially surprising, as I knew anecdotally of many ICT-based cross group and international educationally focused projects. However, focusing only on government-supported (rather than privately-funded) educational initiatives that had both primary goals of improving and supporting community cohesion, and for which there was data about their impact, revealed the limited national efforts in this area. Additionally, each national case description illustrated, perhaps unsurprisingly, the common view most governments take toward the educational value and potential of ICT in education, seeing it mainly in terms of cognitive learning outcomes. Governments themselves are time-limited in their existence and improving community cohesion is a complex and long-term issue. Further, the potential value and challenges of ICT for community cohesion is an area that is only starting to be more extensively researched. Additionally, one is reminded of the bumpy road that characterizes the integration of

ICT in education even for purposes clearly related to schools' learning mandate (e.g. Cuban & Cuban, 2009) making the relatively little evidence of national initiatives of ICT use for social uses less surprising. In the end, while it is hard to draw clear comparisons across such a range of different national settings, the framework of the contact hypothesis and the descriptions of professional development efforts do provide common threads across these disparate contexts and illustrate the enormously diverse relationships that exist between education and government in different countries, but the optimism of the authors for the benefits of using ICT for supporting community seems somewhat overwhelmed by the real challenges they identified within each setting. In the end, one is left with the question of what would ultimately motivate governments to increase support such for initiatives within the educational system? The path is not clear. Even with that limitation, this is a very accessible book that would be of interest to a broad range of readers, including educators of various stripes, classroom teachers, online learning specialists and any reader concerned with issues of citizenship and schooling in this digital age.

Finally, this book importantly contributes data about the actual state of things, particularly in the area of new technologies that are often the subject of very impassioned and idealistic claims. Research initiatives in this area have been critiqued for not asking more "state-of-the-actual" questions (Selwyn, 2010). By reviewing educational efforts in various countries, Austin and Hunter's book gives us deeper insight into the political and social complexity that influences how and whether ICT use in education might support efforts to increase community cohesion, and ultimately reduce damaging societal conflict.

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