

Chapter 4

Israel: Connecting Cultures in Conflict

Introduction

Israel is considered a high-tech country, but it is also considered a country "in conflict." While these two subjects may not seem related, they actually offer an opportunity to battle the culturally diverse conflict while using technology. Since the development of the Internet, attempts have been made to use technology to bring people from diverse backgrounds together online. The potential for using the Internet to build bridges and connections between cultures in conflict has wide implications for changing attitudes, prejudice and stereotyping.

This chapter reviews cultural diversity in Israel, the attempts to bring conflicting groups together and, finally, the Trust Building in Online Collaborative Environments (TOCE) a model developed by the founders of the Technology, Education & Cultural Diversity Center (TEC) to bridge among cultures in conflict in Israel and its implementation in various academic programs and projects.

Research on the TEC Center's programs indicate that structured Information and Communication Technology (ICT) intervention can reduce bias, stigmas, and ethnic prejudice among project participants and help them become proficient technology agents of technology-based social change.

Background

Israel is a culturally diverse society with many divisions. The three main cultural segments composing the Israeli society are: Secular Jews, Religious Jews and Arabs¹. However, it is

¹ The word *Arabs* refers to the Arab population that resides in Israel. This group has various names which mainly reflect a specific political point of view, such as: Palestinians in Israel, Israeli Arabs, Arabs 48 etc.

important to note that each of the three segments is sub-divided and within each group there is a diversity of cultures and ethnic groups. For example, within the Arab sector, there are Muslims, Christians, Druze, Bedouins, etc. Within the Jewish Sector (religious and secular), there are many cultures and ethnic groups due to Jewish immigration from many different countries (for example, Russians, Ethiopians, Ashkenazi Jews and Sephardic Jews, etc.). Therefore, the conflict in Israel is multi-faceted. It includes a territorial conflict (both sides claim the same territory), a religious conflict (Moslem and Jewish), ethnic conflicts, and a cultural conflict between East and West.

Distribution of the Israeli Population

In 2010, about 7.7 million people lived in Israel, out of which 75.4% were Jews, about 20.5% were Arabs and 4.1% belonged to other groups (Central Bureau of Statistics, CBS, 2010).

Jewish society. The Jewish population consists of a wide range of political ideologies and levels of observance: secular (42%), traditional (13%), religious (12%) and ultra-orthodox (8%) (CBS, 2010). Understanding religion plays a key role in understanding the differences among the Israeli systems. Tensions exist between the different Jewish religious sub-groups, especially regarding the extent of religious practices in the public sphere.

In the cities, one can find a large variety of Jewish affiliations. However, quite a number of religious Jews choose to live in separate communities where they share a similar political and religious outlook with other members of the community. In the ultra-religious segments, social norms restrict interaction between men and women as well as interaction with other religious sub-groups.

Arab Society. Arabs constitute the largest non-Jewish minority in Israel and are distinguished nationally, religiously and culturally from the Jewish majority (Al-Haj, 2004; Ali, 2006). Arab

society in Israel consists of more than one sub-cultural group and is heterogeneous in terms of religion: about 82.5% are Muslims, 9.5% are Christians, and 8% are Druze. These numbers do not include Palestinian Arabs living in either Gaza or the West Bank who are under the auspices of the Palestinian Authority.

Many of the Arabs live in the peripheral areas of Israel (CBS, 2011), and their lifestyle is substantially different from the Jewish lifestyle. However, a great number of Arabs in Israel live in four main cities—Jerusalem, Jaffa, Haifa, and Acre—each of which has a mixed population of Jews and Arabs; however, in most cases, the neighborhoods within the city are separate (Ali, 2006; Al-Haj, 2004). Socio-economic gaps exist between the Arabs and the Jewish society in Israel (CBS, 2010; Ganayem, 2010). Ali (2006) has identified a strong trend of a return to religion in the last two decades, mainly among Muslims. The more devout Muslims become, the more they oppose direct relations between the genders, let alone social relations with the Jewish population.

Separate Educational System

The national Israeli educational system is divided into two sub-groups: Jewish and Arab, and the Jewish system is further sub-divided into secular and religious (orthodox).

In accordance, from kindergarten, children study in a particular education stream (secular Jewish, religious Jewish, or Arab) and do not usually interact with children from the other streams within the system.

The core curriculum in the three sub-educational systems is, in essence, the same. However, the Arab schools use Arabic as the language of instruction and dedicate more hours to the Arabic language and Arab issues. The religious Jewish schools designate more hours to Jewish religious studies.

The exception to the separate educational systems can be found in four bilingual schools that have been established over the past thirty years. In these schools, Arab and Jewish pupils study together and for each subject they have two teachers, Arab and Jewish. They learn to speak both languages, celebrate holidays and festivals of both cultures and share their cultural norms with each other. Such initiatives are not common and have not spread throughout Israel (Bekerman, 2004; McGlynn, Zembylas, Bekerman, & Gallagher, 2009).

There have also been initiatives to join secular and religious Jewish children within the same school and classes and a number of these schools exist today in Israel. The curriculum is adapted so that the children study religious subjects separately. However, this is the exception rather than the rule and most Jewish schools belong either to either the religious or the secular stream.

Policy Regarding Intercultural Education

There is no official national policy regarding intercultural education in Israel. However, projects and initiatives promoting intercultural education have regularly been supported and financed by the various governments.

Inherent in Israel's Declaration of Independence (1948) is the commitment to extend equal rights to "all inhabitants." Israel's educational system demonstrates such a commitment by allowing the opening of schools according to a religious and cultural affiliation. These schools enhance the mandatory educational curriculum with national/religious/cultural subjects. As a result, the majority of schools have a specific religious and cultural orientation with little or no interaction with other cultures.

In 1996, the Kerminzer report recommended that schools teach social studies from kindergarten to 12th grade and within this framework encourage interaction between the

different segments which compose Israel's pluralistic society. However, at the commencement of the Intifada², these student interactions, as described below, ceased.

Educational Projects and Initiatives

Over the last 40 years, there have been numerous initiatives in Israel to bring together diverse groups in a variety of educational settings. From the start of this century, the integration of ICT in these projects has gained momentum, because it enables asynchronous meetings from different locations while at the same time conceals external appearances thus allowing for an unprejudiced first impression.

Past Initiatives and Projects. In the 1980s, the Ministry of Education included a study unit on democracy and coexistence in the curriculum of formal, informal and higher education schools (Maoz & Ellis, 2001).

Over the years, the Ministry of Education has set up various programs to bridge between Arabs and Jews, such as joint teacher seminars. However, with the outbreak of the Second Intifada in 2000, the majority of these government initiatives petered out.

There have been numerous educational initiatives between Arabs in Israel and Israeli Jews involving face-to-face meetings and discussions, mainly between secular Jewish schools and Arab schools, with the objective of fostering contact and intergroup dialogue (Abu Nimer, 1999; Sonnenschein, Halaby, & Friedman, 1998, Salomon 2006). Most of these projects were based on the “Contact Hypothesis,” (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000) which was further developed and applied in Israel by education and social psychologist Yehuda Amir (1969). As

² A period of intensified Palestinian–Israeli violence, beginning in September 2000 and ending around 2005.

explained in Chapter 1, this theory suggests that intergroup contact tends to contribute to the reduction of prejudice, if and when certain conditions are met.

There are also educational initiatives to bring religious and secular Jews together to discuss issues and differences between the two groups. The most popular of these initiatives is the "Gesher" ("Bridge" in Hebrew) organization, which was founded in 1970 and is dedicated to bridging the gap between diverse segments of Israeli Jewish society. 70,000 Israelis participate in Gesher programs each year.

As mentioned above, there are four intercultural schools in Israel with a policy of equality of language and status.

There are also a number of teacher education colleges, pre-dominantly secular Jewish, which are intercultural in nature. Research has shown that there is little social integration and students stay within their own culture and social group (Shamai and Paul, 2003).

Universities are open to all students but more secular Jewish students study at the universities than other groups.

Online Initiatives and Projects

Online cyber-meetings have existed in Israel since the beginning of the Internet in the early 1990s. There are numerous advantages to online meetings between cultures in conflict and people not within the same geographical area. Furthermore, relationships between Arabs and Jews can be built gradually in a secure online environment where there is minimum anxiety, geographical distances are cut and costs are significantly lower than face-to-face meetings. In addition, the online environment allows for more equality of status, intimate contact and cooperation (Amichai-Hamburger & McKenna, 2006; Hoter, Shonfeld & Ganayem, 2009).

Hundreds of short-term projects have been carried out since the year 2000 mainly between secular Jews and Arabs in Israel with mixed results. Often the Internet is used as a follow up to face-to-face meetings where the conflict and identities are discussed. Chat rooms, blogs and websites are used to post reflections and impressions of the conflict (Katz & Yablon, 2003; Kampf, 2011). Since 2007, Internet-based workshops have gained momentum in Israel and the Middle East since the Internet is both attractive to young people and is regarded as neutral ground for meeting. The following are some of the online initiatives launched in Israel:

Yad2Yad3 is an integrated educational and research project aimed primarily at fostering dialogue between Jewish and Arab children in Israel in order to promote a culture of mutual understanding and tolerance. Horenczyk & Bekerman (2009) named the project "Computer-Supported Collaborative Intercultural Education (CSCIE)."

Interactive games have been developed and put online to help pupils think about the problems and complexity of the peace process: Israel and the Palestinian Authority. A much accredited example is "Peacemaker,"³ a computer game developed by Impact Games which allows players to take on the role of a Palestinian from the Palestinian Authority or an Israeli leader in order to solve the conflict through tools such as diplomacy. Results on the influence of these games are encouraging (Gonzalez, Kampf & Martin, 2012). Another example of a role play game is called "SafePassage" which is based on animated flash video clips and blogs (Kampf, 2011).

More recent projects use social networks to join Jewish and Arab youth in Israel in discussions on mutual interests. The youth movement called "Yahla" targets the age group of 15-

³ <http://yad2yad.huji.ac.il>

30, and strives to enhance future leadership, further coexistence, security, economic development and social issues. Its first virtual online council took place in January 2012.

There are online courses taught in various teaching colleges that include Jews (secular) as well as Arab Israeli students. As part of the study, the students are required to do group work and thus interact with their peers. There is also a project in schools called “Schools Online4” in which Jewish schools engage in online activity with Arab schools in Israel. This initiative was funded in 1998 by the business sector and now it is part of the Ministry of Education’s activities to foster collaborative learning.

Although the extent of Internet-based encounters between Jews and Arabs within and outside of Israel has gained momentum in recent years, the number of studies evaluating these encounters is relatively limited and they have produced contradictory results. Several of these studies have indicated that the Internet can serve as an effective space to promote learning and understanding of the "other" (Molov & Lavie, 2001; Hoter et al., 2009).

Theoretical Models of the Projects

Maoz (2011) has divided the different types of projects into four different model types:

- **Coexistence model:** This type of program seeks to promote mutual understanding, tolerance and the reduction of stereotyping, fostering positive intergroup attitudes and advancing other goals in the spirit of the Contact Hypothesis. This model emphasizes commonalities and similarities, and supports notions of togetherness and cooperation between Jews and Arabs in Israel (Maoz, 2004). The model was adopted in Israel in the 1980s and has been the dominant model for peace encounters.
- **Joint Projects model:** This model has been in Israel since the 1980s. It is similar to the coexistence model and is based on Muzafer’s study (1966) showing that working

⁴ http://cms.education.gov.il/educationcms/units/madatech/hatamat_marechet_21/lemidashitufit/projects.htm

together to achieve a super-ordinate common goal can increase sympathy and encourage the formation of a common identity. Examples of this model include choirs, study groups, mixed soccer teams and online courses and projects.

- **Confrontational model:** This model was first presented and applied by Arab facilitators in Israel in the early 1990s who felt that the previous models did not express their needs and desires as a national minority group. The projects and programs using this model emphasize the importance of discussing the roots of the conflict and power relations between the sides. The goal of the model is to modify participants' perceptions of the identity of the other and to encourage greater awareness of the asymmetrical relationships in Israel (Halabi & Sonnenstein, 2004). The model is based on the Social Identity Theory and emphasizes intergroup interaction as a means of transforming attitudes (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). The number of studies on the confrontational model is very limited (Ellis & Maoz, 2007).
- **Narrative-Story-Telling model** (Bar-On, 2010): This model combines aspects of the previous models using a narrative approach where participants use story-telling to share their personal and collective narratives, experiences and suffering with regard to the Middle East conflict. The assumption of this model is that in order to achieve reconciliation, groups in intractable conflicts need to work through their unresolved pain and anger by using story-telling. In contrast to the confrontational model, this model succeeds in fostering acceptance, mutual understanding and constructive dialogue between rival groups due to personal stories (Ellis & Maoz, 2007, Weiss 2008).

Based on the narrative model, Stock, Zancanaro, Rocchi, Tomasini, Koren, Eisikovits, Goren-Bar & Weiss (2009) conducted a study focusing on cooperation between pairs of young Israelis of Arab and Jewish origin, where the participants were required to create a joint

narrative based on photos showing positive and negative aspects of the conflict, reflecting the points of agreement and disagreement between them. Initial findings are encouraging, and it will be interesting to see how the narrative model works online.

The use of virtual environments, such as Second Life, as a neutral place to carry out dialogue and discussion between the groups, looks promising for all four models, and a few experiential projects have been carried out in this area (Kampf, 2011; Shonfeld, Resta & Yaniv, 2011).

Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in Intercultural Education

Integration of ICT in School Curriculum

The Israel Ministry of Education has been implementing computerized learning in schools since the early 1990s as part of the "Science and Technology" Curriculum. Schools received computers, and new books with learning software were produced. However, the OECD report on PISA scores has previously placed Israeli students under the average score in most ICT skills tests (OECD, 2011).

In response to the relatively poor achievement of the students in national scores, the Ministry of Education launched a new program in the 2010-2011 school years to adapt the education system to the 21st century through the use of innovative pedagogy that integrates ICT. This ongoing program, aims to equip pupils with the relevant skills for optimum functioning in the 21st century ("21st century skills"): teaching is adapted to suit the diversity of the students, to break down barriers between the school and the outside world, and to make maximum, yet enlightened use of technology to promote the teaching processes, both at the pedagogical level and at the pedagogical management level (Ministry of Education, 2011).

Integration of ICT in Teacher Education Colleges

In Israel, in order to become a teacher up to grade 9, one attends one of the country's 24 teacher education colleges for a period of four years. The degree granted at the end of the four years is a B.Ed. and a teaching certificate with a teaching license. Research carried out in 2009 (Goldstein, Shonfeld, Waldman, Forkush-Baruch, Tesler, Zelkovich, Mor, Heilweil, Kozminsky & Zida, 2011) indicated that while most pre-service teachers entering teacher education colleges had basic ICT skills even during their ICT-integrated courses, they used mostly traditional methods in their teaching practice. Furthermore, innovative models of ICT integration, such as, collaborative learning, inquiry, web-based synchronous and a-synchronous distance learning, were rare. The students received little experience in using Learning Management Systems and course websites; therefore, they were not sufficiently exposed to the advantages of learning management via technology. These findings lead to the conclusion that Israeli teacher education programs did not provide pre-service teachers with adequate skills and competencies to teach while using technology in the classroom.

ICT integration in teacher education colleges began as a "top-down process" initiated by the Department of Teacher Education in the Ministry of Education, followed by a "bottom-up process" a few years later, when innovative teachers initiated ICT-based projects with the support of the Department of Teacher Education and the teacher education colleges. The MOFET Institute – an “umbrella” institute of professional development serving all 24 teacher education colleges - played an important role in the diffusion of innovations within the teacher education settings, being a central node in the communication of innovative ideas and novel experiences for teacher educators (Goldstein et al., 2011).

As a result of the national program, a revised and innovative program was created to better prepare teachers to implement ICT in teaching and learning (Melamed, Peled, Mor, Shonfeld,

Harel & Ben Shimon, 2010). This program is in its initial stages, but has already stirred discussion regarding the most effective implementation under budget restraints.

Learning ICT: Practicing Coexistence

The TEC Center develops and implements a collaborative learning model based on advanced technologies for lecturers, teachers, pre-service teachers and pupils from different ethnic groups and religions, yielding constructive dialogue and cooperation between diverse groups and eventually tolerance and mutual respect (Shonfeld, Hoter, Ganayem, et al., 2008 ; Hoter, Shonfeld & Ganayem, 2009; Ganayem, Hoter, Shonfeld & Walther, 2012).

The TEC Center was established in 2004 and is based in the MOFET Institute. It is a collaborative initiative of three highly diversified teacher education colleges in Israel: Seminar Hakibbutzim College of Education (a secular Jewish college), Al-Qasemi Academic College (an Arab Muslim college) and Talpiot College of Education (a Jewish religious college). The MOFET Institute's mission is to serve as a professional meeting-place for teacher educators and to facilitate an educational dialog among colleagues both in the teacher education system and in other settings in the education system.

The TEC Center brings together individuals and groups who normally would not have the opportunity to meet, such as pupils, students and lecturers from different ethnic, religious and cultural groups who connect with others outside of their own religious and political affiliations.

Whereas many projects involve two cultural sectors, the TEC Center brings together three distinct cultural groups (Jewish secular, Jewish religious and Arabs in Israel). These groups meet, mainly online, not to talk about conflict or to discuss differences but to advance a joint educational mission. Through these online interactions, they get to know each other as colleagues on an equal basis.

The TEC Center's Main Objectives. The TEC Center's objectives are:

1. The development of innovative educational models that bridge among cultures, using and applying advanced technologies;
2. The training of teachers from diverse cultural backgrounds to use the Internet and other advanced communication technologies as teaching tools while becoming acquainted through collaborative small group learning;
3. The development of online teaching units that encourage acceptance of those who are "different" and make them part of the curriculum in teacher education colleges and schools;
4. The creation of an intercultural online community comprised of the teaching staff of education colleges and schools;
5. The generation of ties among teachers, pre-service teachers and students from different cultures;
6. The stimulation of cooperative intercultural ventures among educational institutions and non-profit organizations, as well as with the Ministry of Education in Israel and organizations in other countries facing culturally diverse challenges.

The TEC Center's Target Audiences. The TEC center works with:

- academic staff in the teacher education colleges,
- students in the teacher education colleges,
- teachers in schools and
- pupils in schools who collaborate on educational projects.

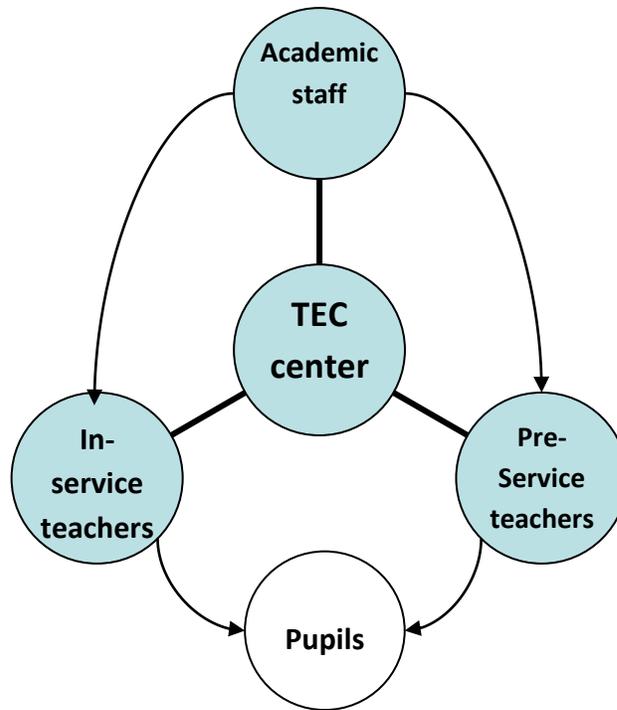


Figure 1: Populations and the relationship among them

The TOCE model (Trust Building in Online Collaborative Environments)

The activities in the courses, all developed by the TEC Center, employ advanced Internet technologies and are based on a collaborative learning model called the TOCE model. The TOCE model is derived from the contact hypothesis, (Allport, 1954; Amir, 1969; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000), collaboration theories (Johnson & Johnson 1994; Slavin, 1989) and models of online collaborative learning (Austin, 2006; Salomon, 2011).

TOCE is implemented by the educators of the participating groups, within small teams from diverse cultures, progressing from online communication (written, oral, video) to face-to-face interaction, in order to gradually build trust between participants (Hoter, Shonfeld & Ganayem, 2009).

The model works through online collaboration via joint assignments over a period of at least one year with pre-service teachers in their second or third year training. Team members get to know each other, develop mutual respect, eliminate stigmas and reduce mutual prejudices. Thus, when the pre-service teachers become teachers, they serve as major agents of social change, having influence on generations of children.

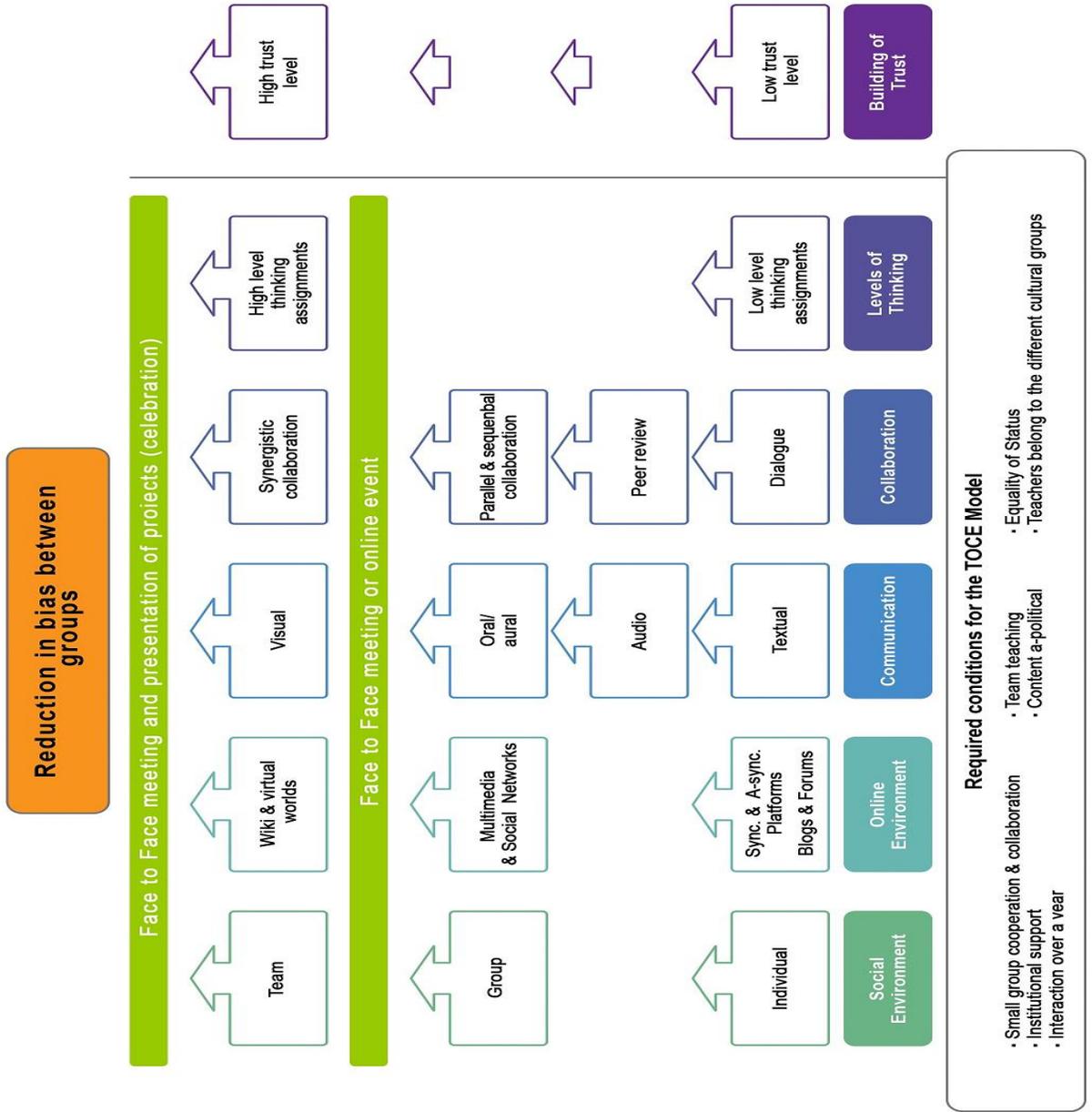


Figure 2: TOCE Model

TEC Programs

The TEC Center has developed and implemented a number of programs within the education system, directed at different populations as described in Figure 1. All the projects are based on the TOCE model which can be categorized within the Joint Projects model described above.

The TEC Center's mission is to ensure that the online multicultural collaborative learning course is available and accessible to every pre-service teacher in teacher education colleges in Israel. In 2011, a new course was inaugurated focusing on biology where participants from different colleges work using the TEC model.

Programs for Academic Staff. The programs for academic staff and faculty include: conferences, building a community of practitioners, webinars and workshops. In addition, the Center provides online and face-to-face support and training for lecturers teaching in the programs, throughout the academic year.

Programs for Pre-Service Teachers. The TEC Center initiated, in 2005, a multicultural IT teaching course, in three culturally diverse teacher education colleges, which soon evolved to ten teacher education colleges (out of 24 in total) working together using online collaborative teaching and learning methods.

These culturally diverse, virtual groups collaborate online throughout an academic year during which they complete a number of group projects and tasks. The course is delivered online synchronously and asynchronously based on team teaching and group projects, in a cooperative, non-competitive environment. The multi-collegial IT course focuses on computerized tools and online teaching methods (including forums, blogs, wikis, film editing programs, and more). Teachers' to-be learn how to utilize technology in teaching, and they

jointly practice the implementation of such acquired technological tools through a given topic or discipline of their choice.

The participants work in small culturally diverse groups of six members, (Walther & Bunz 2005; Mortensen & Hinds, 2001) each member comes from a different college, and each pair of colleges are affiliated with one of the different cultural sectors, i.e secular Jewish, religious Jewish and Arab.

The communication among the groups begins with text-based forums, but as the course progresses, the online educational platforms enable audio communication. Initially, there is a lecture with two-way communication between the lecturer and the trainees. Later, the groups begin to communicate directly through audio programs. After a few months of meetings through the Internet almost every week, the students meet either through a video conference or face-to-face. At the end of the academic year, the students meet to socialize and present their group project exhibitions. At that point, the groups' interests have become paramount and the cultural differences have become minimal. (Ganayem, Hoter, Shonfeld, & Walther, 2012).

Course topics reflect subjects taught within the formal education system (such as: science, environmental studies, special education, nutrition and health, mathematics, current events, drama, music, etc.). In addition to reading articles, the management of and participation in discussions, and online instruction, the collaborative Internet teaching and learning include the collaborative creation of online and multimedia educational materials. Examples of this include: (a) development of an educational game; (b) creation of a video clip; (c) involvement in Internet research, including use of various databanks; (d) using collaborative online tools such as “voicethread” “mindomo” and “google docs” (e) participation in activities incorporating understanding and the implications of safe and secure Internet use; (f) reflection via personal

blogs; (g) building of treasure hunts and Web quests; (h) working and collaborating on a wiki and social network.

The course is based on online units in which part of the work is asynchronous, coupled with synchronous lessons that take place every two to three weeks. Its unique format allows trainees to learn and interact at their convenience in a Learning Management System (Moodle), which includes learning materials, tasks, and discussion forums. The communication component provides a virtual café, where participants can get help, feedback and support on group assignments from their peers. The webinars are conducted through the “Elluminate” program.

A checklist of graded criteria is given for each assignment. Such criteria include the evaluation of individual and group cooperation and collaboration, influencing both the individual grade as well as the group grade. In order to achieve the maximum grade, participants need to collaborate with their partners.

Teachers are potentially major agents of social change and dialogue among cultures in that they are charged with the important task of training the future generation. Therefore, it is vital that students in teacher education colleges be exposed to courses on cultural diversity or to exchanges with sectors and groups other than their own. This is true not only between Jews and Arabs but also between secular and religious Jews. As a result, when these students become teachers, they will reflect their "new" and moderated point of view of the “other” among the children they teach, and thus help diffuse the ongoing stereotyping of the "other."

Programs for schools: "The TEC-Amirim Project," a collaboration of the TEC Center, and the Ministry of Education's Division for Gifted and Outstanding Students, is an enrichment project, within the Amirim program for gifted children, which utilizes ICT to start a dialogue between religious Jews, secular Jews and Arabs in Israel.

The participants include children, aged 11-12, from nine schools, who work in clusters of three schools (i.e., Arab, Jewish religious, and Jewish secular), selected by the regional advisor of the Ministry of Education, considering the existence and availability of the required technology for the project.

The project activities designed for the school year are based on a series of specific ICT-related tasks that the TEC project team created. These tasks use the Virtual Learning Environment, a social network developed for the course, and a range of software including Audacity, Voki, Voicethread, Photostory and PowerPoint, to enable the children to gradually connect with one another, first through written exchange in the online forums, then through audio work, and finally through a joint multi-media activity. It was agreed that the main language of communication would be Hebrew, backed by extra support for language in the Arabic speaking schools.

The supervising teachers from each school participate in an accredited in-service training course tailored for the project. They meet, face-to-face, for a training session, before the beginning of the school year, and again in the middle of the school year, in order to prepare the joint implementation of the forthcoming activities, as well as to become updated with new technology. In addition, throughout the school year, they meet online, twice a month, to discuss ongoing issues, learn new technologies and develop a teaching unit. Participation in this project enables the teachers to become involved in similar programs in the future.

At the end of each school year, the children and their teachers meet at an amusement park or a museum. The main objectives of this encounter are to have actual social interaction among the children through games prepared by the team, summarize the learning process that took place, and to celebrate the collective achievements of the teachers and the children.

As the children's feedback was so positive, a similar experimental project has been set up in junior high schools including three schools (one from each of the three sectors) in which the pupils work together on environmental issues. The goal is to further implement the model in the school system, from elementary school to college, so that the project can have a significant social impact.

Feedback Analysis on the Impact of the TEC Projects:

Programs for Pre-Service Teachers. In order to evaluate the TOCE model and the various projects, questionnaires were given and interviews were conducted. Questions regarding attitudes among the three groups were given to the students before, during and after the course. For example: “To what extent are you willing to meet... (Arabs, religious Jews, secular Jews)?” “Would you be willing to visit...?” and “Are you willing to help...?”

With some minor fluctuations, the students' answers indicated that participation in the course reduced students' prejudicial attitudes toward the other groups, and in particular between the Jewish religious and the Arab group, to a statistically significant extent (see Ganayem, Hoter, Shonfeld, & Walther, 2011). Among those groups, the wall of preconceived notions, mistrust, and lack of readiness to even listen to the other, declined significantly for the participants from the beginning to the end of the course.

Such change in attitude was movingly reflected in the words of a religious Jewish student:

I am leaving this course with an important contribution. Tomorrow, when I teach my students, I will be able to say that we are all equal human beings, even if we have our differences. When I say the word "an Arab" to my students, it will sound different from what it sounded like prior to the course.

From the on-going observations conducted, it was also evident that an attitude of tolerance and acceptance of differences was developed, and there was a noticeable decrease in the preconception of the “other” - the religious, the secular, the Jew, and the Arab.

The atmosphere in the face-to-face meetings was at most times pleasant and sympathetic. Feedback from the projects' participants indicates that the projects enable communication between students from different cultures, who do not communicate on a daily basis. The collaborative work presented an opportunity that otherwise would not have existed to get to know the other side. For Example, M. (from a secular college) stated:

After participants have worked together, the understanding of the other sector changes. The work together during the course narrows barriers and stigmas, allowing the other side to get to know the other and breaks down prejudice. The positive experience allows us to view the other culture somewhat differently.

There were initial concerns about cultural and religious differences among participants. One of the students, N. (from an Arab college) reported: “It was difficult for me at first. I had doubts until I got to know my Jewish friends. It was the first time I got to know people from another school.” T. (from a Jewish religious college) stated:

As an observant woman from the ultra-Orthodox world, I initially thought that I would run into communication difficulties with other course participants, as we are all from different backgrounds, but, to my surprise, I got along with everyone during the course.... The course exposed me to a great deal of information regarding people from other ethnic groups.

As for the creation of new friendships, a distinction can be made between social connections formed during the participation in the project, and those that lasted beyond the duration of the project. Although friendships were developed during the course of the joint cooperation, they did not continue after the course was over. As a result, and in order to

encourage the continuous collaboration and dialogues, a social network for alumni activity was recently set up. (<http://tecs.macam.ac.il>)

Impact of the Project in Schools ("TEC-Amirim")

In the school projects, the pupils appear to have enjoyed taking part in the online project and said that there were a number of positive outcomes including “meeting new friends,” carrying out the ICT activities, and improving Hebrew skills (in the case of the Arab children). Several children commented on the improvement of their ICT skills and on the gaining of a better understanding of different cultures.

In general, children who have had little contact or knowledge of children from the other cultures before the course noted their gained appreciation of festivals, traditions, language and food of the other. One of the pupils said that “they are like us but different.”

In the Arab school, some of the pupils have had contact with Jewish children before but not a close connection. For these children, the sustained contact in the course over the school year enabled them to gain a better understanding of the “other.”

In one of the Jewish schools, the teacher said that he had been pleasantly surprised that his pupils, who started out with an assumption of superiority in the realm of ICT studies quickly came to see that the Arab children were just as good at ICT as they were. In this school, the pupils talked about how they had learned more about the other children, that they were “the same but spoke a different language.”

This is a very important finding in the wider context of relationships within Israel and suggests that the use of ICT as the focus on work is creating an even playing field where prior assumptions about status and hierarchy are left behind (Austin, 2011).

Challenges

Objective Challenges. Despite the success of the TEC Center, it is faced with many challenges. Perhaps the most crucial is the continuous political tension in the area, topped by a lack of a clear and formal educational policy to encourage online bridge-building projects, thus making it difficult to expand the activities of the TEC Center.

Faculty and teachers are required to invest much time over and beyond the payment they receive for working in the project and ways need to be found to compensate the instructors. In addition, a common language of instruction, despite recent advancements in technology, is still a barrier for equal participation in the projects.

Subjective Challenges. While satisfaction was reported in interviews, problems were reported as well, and lessons were learned for further improvement of the courses' format. Most of the problems evolved around cultural differences, language barriers, different study habits, intercultural competitiveness and the selection of "hot" topics to study about, where there is inherent disagreement. In the school project most of the problem areas evolved around connecting between the groups in the schools and the resulting frustration when not receiving timely responses.

There were also ideological and psychological barriers. For example, there was resistance to participating in the TEC projects by many orthodox Jewish schools and colleges which are opposed to mixed gender online collaborations and therefore it was difficult for orthodox Jewish male students to attend the face-to-face meetings, as they included both men and women. Secular Jews also had reservations about collaborating with orthodox Jewish students as well as Arab students, many of whom look and dress differently and espouse different religious beliefs. For the Arab students, the barrier was one of language and fear of facing inequality in the group (varying technological levels, different learning pace and style, etc.).

To overcome the challenges, to implement lessons and feedback and in order to offer courses of the highest academic level, the TEC Center's projects have undergone changes, adaptations and improvements over the years--pedagogically, technologically and structurally.

The TEC Center believes that it can stimulate social change and impact future generations through its culturally diverse collaborative ICT projects and programs.

Summary

Israel is a culturally diverse country; it is home to people from many different cultures and religions that hold a variety of ideologies and beliefs. No doubt that some of Israel's outstanding achievements since its inception in 1948 can be attributed to such cultural abundance. But what seems a gift is also its greatest challenge, as cultures, religions, ideologies and beliefs tend to clash, especially when a territorial conflict is added to the equation.

Out of the many groups that exist in Israel, the three main cultural segments composing the Israeli society are Secular Jews, Religious Jews and Arabs. As the relationship between these sectors is often charged and tense, it has created a division in many aspects of life. One notable aspect is the separate education system. Although the Israeli Education System dictates a core curriculum, each sector has its own schools where it includes additional studies that are related to its ethnic/ cultural/ religious orientation. Attempts to create intercultural schools in Israel exist but are not in its mainstream.

The lack of an official policy regarding intercultural education, dialogue and cooperation has brought about many private initiatives and projects from non-profit organizations and other concerned entities. These projects and initiatives promoting intercultural education have been regularly supported and financed by the various governments in power.

Most projects and initiatives regarding intercultural interaction, whether held face-to-face or online, have facilitated attempts to bring together members from two opposing groups. But over the last decade the TEC Center has introduced innovative programs that allow three distinct cultural groups to interact in a life-changing learning experience, while improving their technological skills. Secular Jews, Religious Jews and Arabs meet, mainly online, not to talk about conflict or to discuss differences but to advance a joint educational mission. Through these online interactions, they get to know each other as colleagues on an equal basis.

The TEC Center is strongly aware of its potential to stimulate social change and impact future generations through its culturally diverse collaborative ICT projects and programs, and continues to be impassioned with a drive to make a true difference.

After eight years of activity, the TEC Center has become a sustainable center responsible for the creation of programs employing advanced Internet technologies for teacher education colleges as well as for schools. Analyses of its various courses in addition to on-going research have indicated that the TEC model yields outstanding results (Ganayem, Hoter, Shonfeld & Walther, 2012). More online projects and initiatives of this calibre will surely lead to deeper understanding and acceptance among the cultures in the region.

The Writers (Founders and Directors of the TEC Center, established in 2005)

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