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Building Community Through Online Learning in Colleges

By Bill Hunter and Roger Austin

McLuhan's notion of the "global village" seems increasingly to be an apt description of the modern world. For several generations, people have been travelling great distances in relatively short times, seeing distant cultures portrayed on television, and, more recently, engaging with one another through social media and web-based videoconferencing. This more recent use of the Internet is usually characterised as "Web 2.0"

In an evocatively titled chapter on the "theology of friendship" in the emerging global village, Delicata (2014) claims that at the height of the Web 2.0 era of Internet development,

> *Facebook* and *Twitter* became the quintessential "village squares," accessed continually through mobile technologies, as their aim to create small groups of men and women who work together, play together, and exchange their daily trivia reveals the true power and the*raison d'être* of the web (p. 100, emphasis in original).

Delicata seeks to resolve a growing tension between a culture of individualism that characterised the modern age and what she seems to see as a growing drive toward collective sameness resulting from people living out the "*raison d'être* of the web." Her resolution of this tension relies on an analysis of some common features of world religions, but for us, the idea that social media and other communications technologies can serve to draw people together and encourage them to focus on what they have in common is a fundamentally educational affordance of technology as is the chance for them to explore cultural differences in a safe, non-threatening environment. In this paper we will review research on international projects which have used communications technologies, primarily email and web-based video conferencing, to bring learners together across geographic, political, religious and cultural boundaries in the interest of building more cohesive communities in places frequently characterised by conflict and sometimes by violence.

The body of research draws mainly on examples based on elementary and secondary schools, primarily in Europe and Israel, so the data do not bear directly on postsecondary education. In presenting this information here, we hope to do two things: 1) to make a case that a focus on technology-supported community cohesion has a place in postsecondary education and 2) to raise questions about how such a focus might be structured and what it might achieve. That is, we hope to focus attention on the lessons that postsecondary educators may learn from the way K-12 schools are using online technologies to promote community cohesion.

Theoretical background

Fifty years ago, the U.S. Supreme Court's landmark ruling in the case of Brown vs. the Board of Education(1954) established that, in the case of American public schooling, "separate is not equal." The case was the basis of a long period of attempts to desegregate the nation's racially segregated public schools, often in the face of considerable local resistance.

At the same time, American social psychologists were actively engaged in research intended to help them better understand the social dynamics that led to the second world war—this included the work of Adorno and his colleagues on the "authoritarian personality (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950), and the later work on dogmatism by Rokeach (1960), as well as the well-known studies of obedience by Stanley Milgram (e.g., 1963, 1974) and many others. Among the early works was Gordon Allport's (1954) analysis of prejudice in which he proposed and tested the "contact hypothesis"—the idea that contacts between members of groups tends to reduce feelings of prejudice about the other group. In the ensuing 50 years, the contact hypothesis has been the focus of extensive research and refinement (e.g., Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

However, it is an over-simplification to say that Allport advocated contact as the method for reducing prejudices. For contact to succeed, he emphasised the importance of the conditions in which contact took place, specifically the importance of equal group status within the contact situation, a common goal for the groups to work on, a structure that requires intergroup cooperation for success in achieving the goal, and an environment of legal or cultural support from authorities (Allport, 1954). Research over the last half century has largely focused on determining and testing those conditions as well as suggesting refinements in them or the addition of new

conditions. In her dissertation study, Torre (2010) provided a good summary of much of this research and concluded that it

> suggests a revision of Allport's optimal conditions of contact: shifting equal group status to an explicit engagement of history, power, and privilege; common goals to shared collectively determined goals; cooperation to participation with negotiated conditions of collaboration; and support of authorities to collectively determined solidarity.

Another body of research has examined the limitations of what constitutes "contact." For example, Mazziotta, Mummendey, & Wright (2011) established that learners who observe videos of members of their own group engaged in successful collaboration with members of an "other" group also experienced a reduction in prejudice against that other group. After reviewing international projects that use online technologies to foster community cohesion in curriculum-based cross-community collaborative projects, the current authors (Austin & Hunter, 2013), drew the following conclusions regarding online communication as a form of contact:

- the purposes of contact projects are generally highly compatible with the methods of information and communications technologies;
- the specific tasks that make up many projects (getting acquainted, collaborating on schoolwork, discussing social issues) are readily achieved using electronic communications;
- the use of ICT allows for the maintenance of a physical distance that may promote confidence and feelings of security in early contacts; and
- there is at least the possibility that ICT-mediated communication will lead to better results than are achieved in some existing face-to-face contact projects. (p. 137)

However, research on the effects of contact has not been universally positive. Some researchers argue that increased diversity actually increases the likelihood of conflict between members of different social groups. Indeed, Putnam (2007) argues that, contrary to the beliefs "progressives" hold about evidence in favour of the contact theory,

> I think it is fair to say that most (though not all) empirical studies have tended instead to support the so-called 'conflict theory', which suggests that, for various reasons –but above all, contention over limited resources – diversity fosters out-group distrust and in-group solidarity. (p. 142)

More broadly, though, Putnam sees these negative tendencies as short term effects as summarised in his three major points:

- Ethnic diversity will increase substantially in virtually all modern societies over the next several decades, in part because of immigration. Increased immigration and diversity are not only inevitable, but over the long run they are also desirable. Ethnic diversity is, on balance, an important social asset, as the history of my own country (U.S.) demonstrates.
- In the short to medium run, however, immigration and ethnic diversity challenge social solidarity and inhibit social capital. In support of this provocative claim I wish to adduce some new evidence, drawn primarily from the United States….
- In the medium to long run, on the other hand, successful immigrant societies create new forms of social solidarity and dampen the negative effects of diversity by constructing new, more encompassing identities. Thus, the central challenge for modern, diversifying societies is to create a new, broader sense of 'we'. (p. 139, parentheses inserted)

This line of research inspired educators in Europe to seek ways to bring together the children of groups that were in conflict—with the hope of diminishing feelings of prejudice in future generations and thus reducing incidents of violent conflict. Some examples of this kind of work are:

Dissolving Boundaries

The 1921 treaty that ended the conflict between Ireland and Great Britain divided the island into the two parts that still exist today—26 counties forming the Republic of Ireland in the southern part of the island and the remaining 6 counties becoming a province in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Friction between Northern Ireland citizens who wanted their part of the island to be part of the Republic—called Republicans or Nationalists—and consisting mainly of Roman Catholics—and those who preferred the existing union with Great Britain—called Unionists and consisting mainly of Protestants—continued throughout the 20th century with considerable violence from 1969 to the late 1990's. Although the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 did much to reduce violence and

create conditions for reconciliation, the history of conflict left “a legacy of suspicion and distrust that continues to affect relations between the two parts of Ireland” (Hunter & Austin, 2014, p. 41).

The Dissolving Boundaries project began in 1999 in the wake of the Good Friday agreement. Funded by the ministries of education in both Ireland and Northern Ireland, Dissolving Boundaries (http://www.dissolvingboundaries.org/) was a collaboration between the National University of Ireland at Maynooth in the Republic of Ireland, and the University of Ulster in Northern Ireland.

Specifically inspired by the contact hypothesis Dissolving Boundaries facilitated projects that bring teachers and children together across the Irish political boundary (and therefore also across religious boundaries) in projects that are based on common curriculum elements in the two school systems and that use technology to enable their students to collaborate with students in the other part of Ireland. According to the project’s 2013 yearbook report (Dissolving Boundaries, 2013), about 40,000 children in Dissolving Boundaries projects had used online conference software, videos, and email to learn together in teacher-developed activities that emphasised shared research, problem solving and writing in all curriculum areas. Research and evaluations have consistently shown that the students enjoy the experience, that they feel they know more about students in the “other” community, and that they have more positive attitudes toward people who are different from themselves (e.g., Dissolving Boundaries, 2013; Austin & Hunter, 2013; Rickard, Austin, Smyth, & Grace, 2014).

eTwinning

Today’s Europe aims to create an economic union that embraces diverse cultures, different languages and a history of conflict that includes World Wars I and II. Moreover, the history of colonialism now involves the migration to Europe of people from former colonies adding even more cultural and religious diversity. The eTwinning program (http://www.etwinning.net) uses computer-based communication technologies to bring school children together in education projects that, like the Dissolving Boundaries projects, cross national boundaries and aim to encourage mutual understanding and tolerance.

The eTwinning project now enters its tenth year and reports that, as of January 2014, it was “available in twenty-six languages and involved nearly 230,277 members and over 5,462 projects between two or more schools across Europe (eTwinning, 2015, para. 3).”

Most evaluations of the eTwinning programme have consisted of case studies and surveys of the perceptions of participants. Overall, results have shown that participants believe the projects have “increased technological skills, supported meaningful collaboration, and fostered improved understanding of other members of the European community (Hunter & Austin, 2014, pp.43-44).”

The Mofet Institute

Israel is ethnically diverse due to the combination of local Arabic people and the immigration of Jewish people from Europe, the Middle East, North America, and Africa, but it is also more religiously diverse than outsiders might imagine. While about 80% of the population are identified as Jewish, about 80% of that group self-identify as either “not religious” or “not so religious” with only 10% considering themselves “very religious.” (Government of Israel, 2011, p. 13). On the other hand, more than 50% of the Arabic population describe themselves as “religious.” It is worth noting, however, that the Arabic population includes small populations of Arabic Christians and Druze.

Researchers at the Mofet Institute in Tel Aviv use communications technologies to bring children in this ethnically and religiously diverse community together to work on school projects (Shonfeld, Hoter & Ganayem, 2013). Some of the cultural/religious groups require religiously separate education and some also require separate education by gender. Therefore, many of Israel’s children attend schools that are culturally, religiously, and sexually homogeneous; however, there are also some schools with a greater diversity in the student population. This complex schooling pattern reflects the divisions in society, including housing patterns, so many of Israel’s children rarely have face-to-face contact with children from Israeli communities other than their own.

The Mofet Institute researchers began their online work with teacher educators who were willing to conduct online projects in the schools. Researchers and teacher educators have developed a variety of models of online educational interaction, including games that stimulate discussion of social issues. More recently, Israeli projects have engaged students in the use of social media to reach out across religious and ethnic barriers. Research based on interviews with teachers and students has generally showed that students begin the online class projects with concerns and reservations about communication with members of the “other” group, but that at the

end, they report increased levels of trust and reduced levels of prejudice. Schon noted a recent change in delivery that they believe to have much promise:

> But over the last decade, the TEC Center (at the Mofet Institute) 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. (Shonfeld, Hoter & Ganayem, 2013, p. 57-58)

Such projects are not designed to be direct empirical tests of the contact hypothesis. Rather, they are in the spirit of “design experiments” which Cobb, Confrey, Lehrer, and Schauble (2003) characterise as: “Prototypically, design experiments entail both ‘engineering’ particular forms of learning and systematically studying those forms of learning within the context defined by the means of supporting them (p. 9).” Collectively, we believe they make a good case for further explorations of the potential for online educational communication projects to provide ways for members of diverse and conflicting groups to learn to work together.

More modest action research projects can also be found in the literature. For example, Tarrant, Godwin, Daniel, and Bolton (2013) reported on a teacher-developed middle school project in which students in an urban public school and students in a suburban Jewish private school collaborated in the creation of a wiki focused on young adult literature that dealt with issues of diversity. The authors felt the wiki was vital in providing an environment that supported collaboration “when schedules and classes do not coincide (p. 51).” The teacher-authors reported satisfaction with the outcomes of their project but felt that they could accomplish more if the teachers planned in advance to use the same literature and assign the same tasks. Such projects demonstrate the feasibility of small-scale local initiatives that rely on teacher initiative and existing, available resources.

Community cohesion in adult education

It might well be argued that building community cohesion and fostering good citizenship are responsibilities of the K-12 (or primary and secondary) education sector; that the role of tertiary/postsecondary/further education is to prepare people for a productive career or for further study in pursuit of an academic career. However, in Canada at least, the career preparation goal is fairly intertwined with citizenship goals.

For example, the Government of Canada has long recognised its responsibility for supporting citizenship education, both in the narrow role of assisting immigrants in the process of becoming Canadian and in the broader role of building a sense of community. In the early 90s, for example, a government report (McKenzie, 1993) noted the Department of State’s role in promoting and funding knowledge of both of Canada’s national languages and, through the Canadian Studies Programme, supporting

> the development of materials for learning about Canada. These include relevant books, videos, and computer-based and distance education materials. The Canadian Studies Directorate, through its "Matching Dollar" program, encourages private sector support for Canadian Studies projects. The Knowing Canada Better program assists private, voluntary initiatives for the promotion of knowledge about Canada and understanding among Canadians. (para. 42)

Much of the federal government role is expressed as part of the definition of Canada as a multicultural nation. For example, a 2009-10 review of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act (Government of Canada, 2011) reports:

> The *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* requires federal institutions to ensure that Canadians of all origins have an equal opportunity to obtain employment and advancement in their institutions. This chapter highlights activities undertaken by federal institutions to reflect Canada’s multicultural reality in their human resources programs, policies and practices, and to create a responsive and representative work force.
>
> In interpreting the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act*, federal institutions ensure that their human resources policies, plans and activities:
>
> - create respectful workplaces for employees;

- offer diversity and language training for employees; and,
- increase the representation of employment equity groups and other under-represented groups. (Section 2.5A)

That is to say, creating a diverse and respectful workforce is a part of the multiculturalism policy and it would seem, therefore, that colleges and institutes and other career preparation organisations should include that goal as part of the education process. Hyman, Meinhard, and Shields (2011) capture this idea effectively in the culminating paragraph of their review of multiculturalism:

> While other countries are struggling with the concept, the defining feature of Canadian culture in the minds of the majority of young Canadians, is multiculturalism. Addressing racism and social exclusion and strengthening collective social capital may be among the most promising pathways to being Canadian. Therefore, in addition to providing specific programs aimed at immigrant groups to help them integrate successfully, multiculturalism policy should also focus on broader social inclusionary processes at all levels of government and in all sectors of society to redress inequities and enhance nation building as a whole. (p. 20)

In a broader context, the idea of "intercultural understanding" (e.g., see de Leo, 2010) suggests that global citizenship requires the same kind of inclusionary processes for all people. Basically, the idea is that there are both individual and social benefits that accrue when people learn to work with others from different cultures. At the college level, fostering improvements in intercultural understanding tends to involve either direct instruction or placements in culturally different settings. Zhao (2002) has pointed out that related research may be labelled with different terms, (e.g., multicultural competence, diversity competence, intercultural, cross-cultural effectiveness and others). She also points to the relation of this area of research with work done on the contact hypothesis. She put all of this into the context of "college impact theory" in order to develop a research model that would allow her to examine the student background variables and college experiences that influence the development of greater intercultural competence in students (as well the relationship of many of these variables with student achievement). Although her regression analysis and factor analysis of a complex set of variables showed that, in general, there are both situational (college experience) and personal (student background) variables that predict growth in intercultural competence, the results were not sufficiently focused to suggest particular interventions that could be expected to have positive impact if used consistently in college environments.

Reviewing literature on an even broader concept, the "non-market effects of education," Ridley (2006) listed a variety of outcomes that the literature demonstrates to be effects of schooling even after controlling for a variety of confounding variables. Among them, he included the "effect of schooling on social cohesion: voting behaviour, reduced alienation and smaller social inequalities (p.19)."

Schnittker and Behrman (2012) took a rigorous and critical look at the accumulated literature that, like Ridley's (2006) article, found a variety of positive outcomes of schooling. Using regression analyses that sought to control for many confounding variables, they concluded: "Although the schooling-as-panacea view coheres with the progressive leanings of social science, the specific claims they entail need to be evaluated with empirical rigor, as a more rigorous evaluation could reveal precisely what schooling does (online, final paragraph)." It is important to note, however, that the social outcomes examined in bodies of research like those examined by Schnittker and Behrman (2012) and Ridley (2006) are looking specifically at the *unintended* outcomes of higher education. The "community cohesion" research at the K-12 level (discussed above) and the intercultural understanding research should give us reason to think that college programs deliberately designed to foster the development of positive social outcomes have a good chance of having the desired results.

The United Nations saw that online communications have an important role to play in programs designed to increase intercultural understanding when it said:

> The UNESCO Youth Forum of the 31st General Conference,
> *Recognizes* that the Internet can be used as a direct tool to educate people in the aims of internationalism;
> *Recognizes* that ICTs can bring together communities in friendship and within the global community. This can lead to a desire among youth to contribute and take action on important global issues;
> *Recognizes* that the Internet can serve as an open platform to share information about cultures across previously daunting geographic barriers;
> *Calls upon* UNESCO to set up a project to increase awareness of UNESCO and the ideals of a culture of peace and Education and Information for All. (pp. 56-57)

Countries with strong national control of education are perhaps in a good position to take up the challenge of developing online programs that promote community cohesion. In Canada, however, as in the United States, the responsibility for education lies with the provincial (or state) and territorial governments. The Canadian federal government does have responsibility for aboriginal education on reserves, but there has not yet been much federal support for innovative schooling. The considerable variation in the structure of postsecondary and adult education programmes across the country means that the overall goals of the programmes may also vary and it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine all of the provincial variations. However, as an example of government support for this kind of initiative, in 2005, Kathleen Wynne (then Parliamentary Assistant to the Minister of Education and now the Premier of Ontario), in a letter to both the Minister of Education and the Minister of Training, Colleges, and Universities stated: "Community-oriented adult education should involve people at every stage of life and should act as a bridge between groups within communities. This includes seniors and inter-generational groups of learners that benefit from each other's learning (Government of Ontario, 2005, p. 1)." In another document, Ontario cites Riddell (2006) to the effect:

> Attainment of further education not only provides for individual returns such as higher earnings and lower levels of unemployment, improved health and longevity, and greater satisfaction with life, but it is also strongly linked to social returns such as safer communities, healthy citizens, greater civic participation, stronger social cohesion and improved equity and social justice (Riddell, 2006, p. 1).

The point here is that while social outcomes may not be the explicitly desired outcomes of higher education, the Ontario government (as an example) has shown that positive social outcomes are also valued.

Conclusion

In his 2006 Skytte prize lecture, Putnam (2007) presented a compelling general description of what we have been talking about. He had three major points.

- Ethnic diversity will increase substantially in virtually all modern societies over the next several decades…
- In the short to medium run…, immigration and ethnic diversity challenge social solidarity and inhibit social capital….
- In the medium to long run, on the other hand, successful immigrant societies create new forms of social solidarity and dampen the negative effects of diversity by constructing new, more encompassing identities. Thus, the central challenge for modern, diversifying societies is to create a new, broader sense of 'we'. (pp. 138-139)

We see this as a more general statement because, while much of the literature we have examined looks at the use of online technologies in schools set in separate communities to promote community cohesion, Putnam sees diversity within communities (we would include the global community) as a social asset. However, it is noteworthy that Putnam's critique relies on large scale U.S. survey data that enabled him to examine the degree to which people expressed distrust not only of people who are different from them, but also of people who are like them. This led him to observe: "Diversity seems to trigger *not* in-group/out-group division, but anomie or social isolation. In colloquial language, people living in ethnically diverse settings appear to 'hunker down' – that is, to pull in like a turtle (p. 149)." This is the dynamic behind his "short to medium run." After considering how social isolation seems to be decreasing as a result of policy directions, social practices and changing dynamics in 20th century America, Putnam reaches a highly optimistic conclusion:

> One great achievement of human civilization is our ability to redraw more inclusive lines of social identity. The motto on the Great Seal of the United States (and on our dollar bill) and the title of this essay – *e pluribus unum* – reflects precisely that objective – namely to create a novel 'one' out of a diverse 'many'. (p.165)

That conclusion suggests two observations about the role of schooling that we have been discussing here: 1) the ongoing process of redrawing more inclusive lines of social identity has implications for work environments and work relationships in ways that would suggest that there is merit in career preparation that includes intercultural communications skills, and 2) while there is value in engaging students in discussions, face-to-face or virtual, with people from other places or other schools, there is also the possibility that diversity within our classrooms may provide us with a basis for engaging students in intercultural learning even within the confines of our individual classrooms. In our own experience working with online discussions in undergraduate classes in religiously and politically divided Northern Ireland (Austin & Hunter 2012), we found reason to believe that the inclusion of online discussions provided

a valuable form of communication for some students to give voice to their ideas and to attend to the ideas of students different from themselves.

A growing array of social media tools makes it increasingly possible for students to not only communicate with one another online but also to actively construct joint documents and projects (e.g., presentations or videos). The collaborative creation of course projects that employ, for example, Google documents, wikis, PowerPoint or Prezi presentations, or video captures of their onscreen work, would involve students in the kind of active intercultural engagement that was hitherto only possible with expensive exchange programs. Such experience could be a vital part of the preparation of graduates who have both the technical skills and the intercultural understandings that are increasingly required for successful employment.

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Bill Hunter is Professor in the Faculty of Education at University of Ontario Institute of Technology in Oshawa, Ontario. **Roger Austin** is Professor of Education at University of Ulster. Please contact the authors through the email of Bill Hunter at bill.hunter@uoit.ca