KAMRAT:
The Story of a Virtual Multicultural Learning Community in Israel

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ABSTRACT

Israel is a multicultural country, a country made up of different ethnic groups : many having their own culture, language and even religion. There isn't much contact between some of the groups, especially between the secular Jews and the ultra orthodox Jews and between the Jewish population and the Arab population which comprises about 1/6th of Israel's population. The new technologies and especially the technology of on-line computer telecommunication endow us with new tools and possibilities for on-going multi- cultural and multi- age communication between different ethnical groups. The new technologies know no stigma and no prejudice and as such easify and make possible neutral, less biased communication between groups, which are much apart.

This paper is about the creation of an on- going teach community Kamrat, a multicultural on-line learning community, between two schools, in Israel, in 2000:

One Israeli Arab school (A) and the other Israeli Jewish school (J). The tools used for the creation of this community were two: a closed network in Hebrew and the internet. Participants were learners in 7-9 grades. The project was conducted between Jan- May 2000 (with one introductory meeting in November 1999). The communities participating in the project, master two different languages: the language of the Jewish Israeli community is Hebrew, where as the language of the Arab community is Arabic. The project was conducted in the Hebrew language, and the Arab learners were encouraged to write some of the material uploaded in Arabic in Hebrew letters.

INTRODUCTION

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THE VISION

The Kamrat project is my brainchild; it was carried out by Ithamar Aphek, (my son) from the TelHi Networks in collaboration with Ulpan Akiva, an institute famous for its struggle for coexistence.

When I first out lined the Kamrat project, my vision was to have people from different backgrounds conduct an on-going dialog and to learn that people are people, no matter where they come from, and what language they use or religion they hold. It was as simple as that.

I wanted to avoid the political issue, which is very intensive and stormy in Israel, and therefore, I was looking for neutral content, to be researched, collected and uploaded by all the participants in the Kamrat project.

> *The Kamrat project centered around, "simple", "little", ordinary human themes, objects, items, proverbs and sayings passed from parents to children in their families and common in each of the participating community.*

THE PROCESS

Starting the Project
The first step was to choose two schools to participate in the project. We didn't have too many to choose from as schools in Israel and I guess in other countries as well, are over burdened with projects. Starting an additional project was met with some reluctance on the part of the teachers.

Finally two schools chose to participate in the Kamrat experiment: Mushreife an Arab (A)Israeli village in the east of Israel and Ort Gutman, Jewish (J) Israeli in Natanya, a city in center Israel about 100 km from Mushreife.

A. Preparatory Meeting of Headmasters, Teachers, Supervisors and Project Directors
Though the Kamrat project is essentially about on-line co-learning, there were several meetings in person as well.; a preparatory meeting in order for coordinators and headmasters to get deeply involved in the program and to get acquainted with its principles, bi-monthly meetings in the schools, each week in another school, run by Ithamar and Salah, and a final meeting for all the participating members in Ulpan Akiva.

The preparatory meeting was the first in this list of meetings in person. It was held in Ulpan Akiva in Nov. 1999. The following invitation was sent by TelHi Networks and Ulpan Akiva to the schools' supervisors, headmasters and teachers.

Re: Participating in the Kamrat on line learning community
> *The Kamrat project, a multicultural, bi -lingual on- line learning community is a joint venture of the TelHi Networks and Ulpan Akiva.*
> *The project aims at creating a model for an- on going learning dialog between Jewish and Arab schools via a closed network in Hebrew and face to face meetings. The first stage of the program will include only two participating schools: one Jewish school and one Arab school*
> *1-About 25 students from each school will participate in the first stage of the project*

2-In each school a teacher will be assigned to serve as program coordinator the first meeting will take place in Ulpan Akiva on 5/10/99

Sincerely
Prof. Edna Aphek,Telhi Networks
Ephraim Lapid Ulpan Akiva

A Word about the Closed Network

We decided to use two different communication tools, both computers based. The first for rudimentary gathering of information and for on- going dialog between the participants, and the second, once all the material has been collected—the internet.

The first tool was a closed network in Hebrew, run by TelHi Networks, using the FirstClass software outdated 2.6 versions. Unfortunately there are no good intranets in Hebrew and though the SoftArc Firstclass software in Hebrew doesn't contain many much-desired features it still is, quite a good "intranet" in Hebrew.

All participants were connected to the aforementioned "intranet" from school and those who had an internet connection at home could also access the Hebrew network from home. All the work done by the participants, including on going interactions, was recorded on the TelHi closed intranet.

Deciding upon forums

As I have already mentioned, my vision was that of getting people to know other people as human beings, having much in common.

We shunned away from any political issues, and resorted to what one could term as "community informatics". We, myself and Ithamar, who later on together with Salah from Ulpan Akiva, ran the project, decided on five forums on which the entire Kamrat program was to focus: symbols and costumes, objects passed from parents to children, folktales, sayings and proverbs, and feasts and quizzes about famous people in the history of the participating groups. In both participating schools a teacher was assigned to head the project and to work with the multiage, ungraded group on finding and uploading information regarding the aforementioned five areas to the intranet.

It was this intranet, where the two very much apart segments of Israeli society met almost on a daily basis.

In addition to the above forums a designated forum for the coordinators and the group leaders in each school was opened. In this forum the entire process of the creation and formation of Kamrat, was recorded, by Ithamar from the TelHi Networks, and Salah from Ulpan Akiva.

WORK INSIDE THE SCHOOLS

As mentioned above in each of the participating schools a group of 25 students from 7-9 was chosen to take part in the project. Participating learners were divided into groups of 5. Each group was responsible for one forum. Members of the group worked using the tools of cooperative learning. The students met with their teacher once a week for two hours.

Every other week they also met with Ithamar and Salah. The meeting between the two groups, the Arab Israeli group and the Jewish Israeli group, was until May, only a virtual one, via the closed network.

Starting the Project: The First Meeting in the Two Participating Schools

In order to make sure that the core principles and methods of the Kamrat project would be fully understood and adhered to, by all the participants, Ithamar and Salah, went to each of the participating schools, and met in each of the schools with the computer coordinator and the participating students, prior to the actual beginning of the project. The following is the summary of the meetings as recorded by Ithamar and Salah.

A meeting in Mushreife (A) (Salah)

The meeting was composed of several parts:

a. *getting to know the 25 participants from grades 7-8*
b. *presenting the project idea to the students: objectives and implementation*
c. *dividing the group into 5 subgroups according to interest :*
   1. *the story of an object passed in the family from parents to children*
   2. *feasts and customs*
   3. *folktales and legends*
   4. *symbols and costumes*
   5. *sayings and idioms*

d. *explanation of on- going assignment-material to be written in Hebrew or in Arabic in Hebrew letters, so as to bring the Jewish Israeli population closer to the Arab-Israeli one. All material gathered must be related to the Arabic tradition and customs.*
e. *dividing work among group members. Learners divided the work among themselves so that each of them would be responsible for another part of the assignment. One should note that each group is made up of 5: The folktale group divided their work in the following manner:*
2 *learners collect the folktales in Arabic, 2 other learners would translate them into Hebrew, and one student was responsible for finding pictures to match tales.*
f. *Planning the next meeting*
g. *preparing the "who am I" feature on the closed Hebrew intranet, for the first virtual meeting*
h. *in light of communication problems in the school, briefing about how to use the intranet was postponed to the next meeting*
i. *Ithamar and the teacher coordinating the program, stayed for 2 hours after the meeting was over, and Ithamar fixed the computers*

My impressions of the first meeting
   1. *the first meeting went very well and was very successful*
   2. *the learners understood the project objectives and were quite enthusiastic about it*
   3. *the teacher coordinating the project in Mushreife is most cooperative and willing to invest much time and energy, and he should be commended for that*

First meeting, Ort Gutman, (J) Natanya (Ithamar TelHi Networks)

Today, Monday 6/3/2000 the first meeting at Ort Gutman took place. Meeting objective was to present the participating students with the projects mode of operation. All students with the exception of one who was taken ill, took part in the meeting. I briefed the participants how use the closed intranet . Participants divided into groups and each group divide the work amongst its members.

On-going work Jan- May 2000

 The students in each of the participating schools, met once a week for a few hours with the coordinating teacher. They conducted research, read books, interviewed their family members, and uploaded the material gathered as well as their reflections, to the closed intranet. Every other week, either Ithamar or Salah met with the learners and their

teachers. In addition, frequent meetings were conducted on-line. Immediately after the first meeting in each of the schools the youngsters opened a forum where they told the other participating party about themselves, their village or city and their schools.

Sabri from Mushreife (A) wrote about the Mushreife village

The village Mushreife is located in the triangle, near Um El Pahem. The village draws its name from the fact that its located between three mountains and observes over the Jezrael valley.The name Mushreife means in Arabic –observing, looking from above, looking over.The village population is Muslim, and it numbers 3000 people. The village is part of the local municipality of Maale Iron. There are 4 mosques in the village, a sports club, an elementary school, a football team, two health cliniques. Most of the village inhabitants work as building contractors.

Meeting in person, Natanya 3ʳᵈ May, 2000

Students both in Ort Gutman and at the school in Mushreife were working very hard. They were collecting sayings, translating folktales, writing quizzes and teaching each other VIRTUALLY about objects dear to their families, customs and costumes. They kept meeting on line, synchronously and asynchronously, but they have never met in person. Now that the project was nearing its end, a meeting, a "real one" was scheduled in Ulpan Akiva.

The students both the Arab-israelis and the Jewish-Israeli, were very excited.

Preparations for the

out (and uploaded to the intranet) to all the participating members of the Kamrat virtual learning community.

A Few Words about The Meeting Itself

The meeting itself was composed of several parts. The official part where speeches were made, and the less formal, though meticulously planned part, where traditional costumes, foods and music , both Arabic and Jewish were presented.

After the May 3ʳᵈ meeting

Immediately after the meeting in Ulpan Akiva, the participants accessed the TelHi net and wrote their impressions of the face to face meeting.
Muhamad Ali Mushreife (A) says:

A beautiful and great meeting. I have a new friend, Nadav.

Adi Ort (J) wrote the following:

Shalom, I had a great time at the meeting. I enjoyed greatly talking to you and especially with you, Suzan. I hope we'll have many more meetings like this one, and let's please keep in touch.

Shmuel from Ort (J) had the following to say:

I had a great time. It was KEIF (an Arabic word used in Hebrew too, meaning fun) meeting everybody in person! The food was very good, especially the baklawa (very sweet pastry) and the pita with zaatar (Arab bread with herbs). The music was good and it was fun dressing differently. These impressions are echoed by Souhair from Mushreife (A)

It was a great meeting. I made new good friends (girls). I hope we'll have more meetings like this one.
Inshalla (Arabic for "if god will...")

Rasha from Mushreife (A) adds her impressions:

> *I made new friends. The music was great. I was very happy… Lehtiraottttttttttt!!!!!! (See you)*

These are but a few of the many comments and impressions the children had after the meeting in person. For a few months, they had been meeting each other on-line. This is a learning from each other about their city, village, customs and costumes, families and feasts. Now the virtual faces became real and the foods came down from cyberspace to be tasted by hungry youngsters.

These teenagers, united by love of music, sports, and curious about meeting new boys and girls, found many things in common. It was a meeting well planned for months, by all the participating youngsters, and as such it was very successful

**B. Sample Material of Work Done On-Line By Participating Members
In The Kamrat Project (Gleaned From the Telhi Hebrew Intranet)**
Objects passing in the family-handed from grandparents and parents to their children
Sabri Muhamad, Mushreife (A)told the members of Kamrat about the *kandil* -an oil and *kerosene* lamp, much cherished in his family.

> *In the past, he told the virtual community participants, there was no electricity, like today and at nights one would use the kandil. The kandil was made of iron and glass, and in order to lit it, oil and later on, kerosene was used. The Arab person would walk everywhere at night, holding the kandil in his hand.*
>
> *What a lesson in history! No teacher, any textbook, but children, members of the same virtual community, teaching each other.*

Quizzes: Testing Each Other's Knowledge
 Guy from Ort Gutman (J) quizzed the other members about a city in Israel:
> *This city is holy for the Jews as well as for other people and religions.*
> *The city is made up of 4 quarters. The city survived many wars and it serves a symbol of peace.*
> *A wall surrounded the city; part of this wall still exists and serves as a wall for praying.*
> *Which city is it?*

The answer of course, is Jerusalem.

Yulia, also from Ort Gutman (J) composed this quiz:
> *The calm sea, relaxing, serene,*
> *No living soul found there,*
> *Cures diseases, calms soul,*
> *One feels like flying*
> *While floating*

Muhamed Abbdalla from Mushreife (A) writes:
> *Replying to Yulia*
> *It's the Dead Sea*

Children are children, they are supposed to write only quizzes and questions having to do with their cultural background, but the net is a meeting place, and what is more normal for young adults than quizzing each other about football?

Arin Ahmed from Mushreife (A) asks:
Which country won the world cup in 1986?

And Guy from Ort (J) suggests that it was Brazil.
Arin says: ah... ah.. Guy- wrong answer it was Argentine who won the world cup in 1986.

Folktales
Queen Balkis, Queen of Sheba
Suzan Muhamed, Mushreife (A)wrote the story of Balkis-

Queen Balkis is the most famous woman in ancient history.
She is mentioned in the Qu'ran.(the holy book of the Muslims (E.A)
Balkis reigned in Yemen, which is also called Hamiar and Hazar Mavet,
History tells us that she went to many wars in order to maintain her country's Independence.
History gave Balkis many names:
Maxada, Pharaa, Ibn Haldun A famous Arab historian) tells us that her real name was
though Alkama or Balkama, hence Balkis.
The prophet Sliman wrote a letter sent to Yemen in which he asked people to believe in one God.
When Balkis heard about Sliman's letter she said: "I believe in G-d and his prophet".
History tells us that Balkis and Sliman got married, and they lived together for seven years and some months.
When Balkis died Sliman buried her in Tadmor.

Tatyana from Ort (J) write the story of Elijah the prophet and his ascent to heaven. This is what she wrote:

The day came when Elijah the prophet as all humans flesh and blood, had to leave this world... but Elijah went to the other world in a special unique manner, his soul and body went up in a storm to heaven.
How did it happen?
On his last day on earth, Elijah took his disciple, Elisha with him. Elijah, being modest didn't want Elisha to see his ascent, and therefore wanted to leave him in the middle ofthe road.
Elisha refused." My Rabbi and my teacher please let me stay with you," pleaded Elisha.
So they two went together. They kept walking until they reached the Jordan River. 50 prophets to be followed them and waited to see what would happen next. Elijah took off the robe he was wearing and hit the stormy river Jordan. The river was cut in the middle and Elijah and Elisha went on mainland.

As they were walking, where the river used to be, Elijah asked Elisha:
"what can I do for you before I am gone?" Elisha wanted to be able to prophesize twice as much as Elijah could. Elijah said: "if you see me ascending to heaven your wish will be granted." They kept walking while learning the Torah. So when the angel of death came, he could not take Elijah as the Torah protected him.
What did the angel of death do? He sent a chariot of fire and firey horses and those separated the teacher from his disciple.

At that very moment the two stopped learning the Torah. Elijah went in a storm to heaven. Elisha watched him as he ascended. As Elijah was seen no more, Elisha tore his clothes.

Proverbs and Sayings

Ten students, five from Mushreife and five from Ort were responsible for the proverbs and sayings section. Here are some of the sayings the students uploaded to the forum. The proverbs and sayings were written by the Mushreife group in Arabic but in Hebrew letters, and were translated into Hebrew. The students are also looked for a parallel proverb or saying in Hebrew.

Muhamed, Mushreife (A) volunteered the following saying

"Man g'ad va'g'ad va'man zara hasad "Hebrew equivalent "he who works on the eve of Sabbath will eat on Sabbath "meaning that he who works hard and plans for the future will harvest later on.

Nadav from Ort (J) wrote the following saying in Hebrew:
ma shesanui aleixa al taase lexaverxa and then Nadav translated it into simpler-daily Hebrew:
"don't do unto your neighbor what upsets you"

The learners kept dialoging via the closed network:

Nadav asked Nazar from Mushreife (A)

I read the following proverb and I don't understand it- could you help?
"atalbu el alam wlu fi elsin" and Nazar answered:
"*Search science and knowledge even in China".*

Last meeting, Mushreife (Salah, Ulan Akiva)

Unfortunately, I found on the closed intranet only the recording of the last meeting in Mushreife and here it is: 31/5/2000 present: learners, coordinating teacher, school's principal, Ithamar (TelHi Networks) Salah (Ulpan Akiva) The students listed the following advantages of the Kamrat project:

> ➢ *making new friends*
> ➢ *mastery of computer literacy*
> ➢ *using the internet*
> ➢ *integrating learning and experience*
> ➢ *enrichment and in-depth learning of the two cultures: Jewish-Israeli and Arab–Israeli strengthening their knowledge of the Hebrew language*

The students suggested that in the future they would like to have more in person meetings and would like to be taught how to build an internet site. All present at this last meeting noted that the main project objectives i.e. getting to know one's neighbor and learning about what Jews and Arabs in Israel share in common, were fully achieved, thanks to the thorough work of the students who took part in the project, the work done by the coordinating teachers and that of Ithamar and Salah.

And I fully agree...
Salah, Ulpan Akiva

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

The data presented in this paper show that all participants, teachers, directors and students devoted much thorough work to the Kamrat project. All participants, both Arab Israelis and Jews expressed great satisfaction at the project. They all asked for the project to continue.

However, the Ministry of Education financed the project , and this year 2000-2001, the ministry did not continue its support. Therefore there is still lack of clarity as to whether other Israeli institutes or municipalities would assist in supporting the project. Leaving the financial aspect aside there are several comments to be made and conclusions to be drawn and implemented in future multi-cultural projects:

The Academic Aspect Of The Project

Much learning went on in this project. The participating students learnt a great deal about their own culture, and a great deal about the culture of the other. There were no tests, no ordinary homework, yet learners worked very hard. They conducted research, consulted with their family members and to a lesser degree read written material and searched the internet. Yet it was very different from traditional class work; the focus was on getting information from living people and getting the entire family involved in the research conducted.

The Success Of The Project Stems From Several Causes

The hard work put into the project by all the participants and especially by Ithamar and Salah who drove every week hundred of miles in order to meet with the students and the coordinating teachers and headmasters. The use of a closed Hebrew networks in addition to a final product an internet URL is www.peace-education.org.il/kamrat. The frequent recording is of all the stages of the process and reflections of students as well as teachers and project directors.

The Variety of Tasks

Working in groups according to the method of cooperative learning, the approach of which I am a great believer, maintaining that a successful project should start on a small scale, learnt from and only then implemented on a larger scale.

Getting To Know the Other Can Be Done In Many Ways

The way we chose in this project was to use quizzes, proverbs and folktales, as well as what I would term our highlight- objects passed from parents to children in the family. This method is indirect, varied, gives room for every body and mostly strengthens one's cultural identity. Its this strengthening of one's ethnical, cultural identity that made this project work; participants in the project felt they were accepted as who and what they are and no side in the community had a "better " culture.

Cultures weren't measured, no evaluation, no value judgement was going on; it was learning to know each other as human beings, with many stories, cherished objects and customs. Intentionally, we didn't start the multicultural learning community with a face to face, in person meeting.It started somewhere out there, in the cyberspace where no prejudice and hostility reign.It went on in the Meta-land of Israel without strife, where Jews and Arabs can meet as equals and find a common language. When the two groups finally met, they already had that common language enhancing a reality of equality.

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