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Online Learning and Community Cohesion

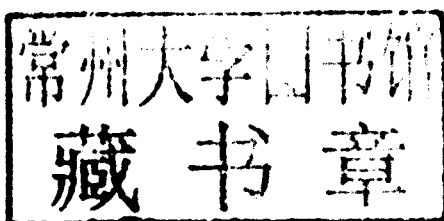
Linking Schools

Roger Austin and Bill Hunter

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Online Learning and Community Cohesion

National governments and multi-national institutions are spending unprecedented amounts of money on ICT on improving the overall quality of school learning, and schools are increasingly expected to prepare young people for a global economy in which inter-cultural understanding will be a priority. This book explores and analyzes the ways ICT has been used to promote citizenship and community cohesion in projects that link together schools in different parts of the world. It examines the theoretical framework behind such work and shows the impact of initiatives in the Middle East, Canada, the USA, England, Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and elsewhere in the European Union.

This is a critical examination of the technologies that have been deployed, the professional development that has been provided and the nature of what constitutes good practice, particularly in terms of what collaborative learning really means for young people. Many of these initiatives have enabled young people to develop more positive relations with culturally and religiously different neighbours, but this work has just begun. Continuing international tensions over matters of identity and faith require that we better understand the political context for such work so that we might shape future directions more deliberately and more clearly.

Roger Austin is Professor at the University of Ulster. He has held a variety of leadership roles and is currently the co-Director of the Dissolving Boundaries programme, which uses ICT to link schools in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. He has published extensively on modern French history, the teaching of history and the role of ICT in teaching, learning and policy implementation. He is the co-author of *E-Schooling: Global Messages from a Small Island*.

Bill Hunter is Professor at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology. He was the founding dean of the Faculty of Education at UOIT. He previously taught at the University of Calgary in Alberta and Mount Saint Vincent University in Nova Scotia. At Calgary, he also served as Director of the Education Technology Unit and Head of the Department of Teacher Education and Supervision. His current research interest is international educational ICT policy and practice. He has conducted research on educational technology, educational measurement, and moral reasoning. Hunter has had extensive editorial experience with research journals, most notably as editor of the *Canadian Journal of Education*.

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Linking Schools
Roger Austin and William Hunter

To all who work to bring communities together.

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Contents

<i>List of Figures and Tables</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xiii
1 Communications Technologies and Positive Social Change	1
2 Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, and England: Conflict and History	17
3 Israel: Connecting Cultures in Conflict MIRI SHONFELD, ELAINE HOTER AND ASMAA GANAYEM	41
4 England: Ethnic Diversity and Parallel Lives	59
5 Europe: ICT, Union, Identity, and Diversity	79
6 Canada: A Nation Built on Diversity	100
7 The United States: Linking the Huddled Masses	118
8 The Promise of Online Contact	135
<i>Notes</i>	153
<i>References</i>	157
<i>Contributors</i>	173
<i>Index</i>	175

Figures and Tables

FIGURES

1.1	Schematic diagram of the operation of the reformulated contact theory.	10
3.1	Populations and the relationship among them.	49
3.2	TEC model.	51
6.1	Population reporting Aboriginal ancestry (origin), Canada, 1901–2001.	106

TABLES

7.1	Percentage of Black Students Attending Schools that Enrolled 50% to 100% Minority Students	124
7.2	Percentage of Black Students Attending Schools that Enrolled 90% to 100% Minority Students	125

1 Communications Technologies and Positive Social Change

For the past four years, we have been working together on a variety of questions regarding the use of educational technologies in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, and Canada. In the process, we have come to feel that there is a need for a broader look at the use of communications technologies as a way of reducing prejudice by bringing teachers and students together across common social boundaries, especially the boundaries that divide people within their own countries. This book is the result of our search. Our starting point was a curious paradox: on the one hand, communications technologies and cheaper travel over the past century have resulted in much more frequent contact between people from different ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds, while on the other hand, immigration patterns have challenged large numbers of people to live and work in communities with people from all over the world. Ethnic diversity has been increasing across Europe with the annual number of migrants to European countries in the 1990s double the figure for the 1980s (Hooghe, Trappers, Meuleman, & Reeskens, 2006). Some have argued that new signs of social division are appearing in many European countries (e.g., Delhey & Newton, 2005). Formerly homogeneous countries are now home to millions who have substantially different worldviews, and large cities around the globe are places of cosmopolitan diversity.

In short, globalization has resulted in communities that are far more heterogeneous and where intergroup contact has the potential to either foster rich cultural interchange or to provoke tension spilling over into violence. Governments have not always been able to agree on how best to manage unprecedented levels of ethnic diversity. While some have sought to build societies built on multiculturalism, such as the Canadian mosaic, others, such as the United States, have tried approaches likened to a melting pot where ethnic differences are subordinated in the interests of national identity and cohesion. In Europe, multicultural approaches in society and in schools which were developed in the 1980s have come under fire for failing to find ways to promote community cohesion (see Chapter 5 in this volume).

Pettigrew (1998b) has suggested that “the world is experiencing two major intergroup trends—massive migration and increased group conflict

2 Online Learning and Community Cohesion

(p. 77).” Some observers also argue that the nature of conflict in the 21st century is changing from national rivalries between countries which marked the 19th and 20th centuries to conflict which is more often internal and sectarian. Of 25 armed conflicts in 1997, for example, only 1 was between states; all the others were internal (Smith & Vaux, 2003). The dangers of sectarian division are well known: lack of trust between groups can hamper economic growth, lead to duplication of public services (for example, in schools), and sow the seeds of damaging community relations (Brocklehurst, 2006; Knox, 2011). In effect, we stand at a nexus of hope and anxiety around how to build community cohesion; in this book we examine what role schools are playing in this process and, in particular, what contribution technology is playing in linking schools together.

THE ROLE OF SCHOOLS

Our starting point was to observe that most governments expect schools to do more than provide an academic education for children; while this remains a core function of schooling, bolstered by the need to educate children to take their place in a highly competitive knowledge-based global economy, there is another dimension to schooling which might have been called “moral education” in the 19th century, but which today is more often called “citizenship.” In many parts of the world, schools are expected to help build community cohesion; as we will see in Chapter 4 on England, the government responded to concerns about the possible radicalization of British-Asian young people in the wake of the 2005 London bombings by making it a *duty* (emphasis added) on schools through the Education and Inspections Act 2006 to promote community cohesion and on the schools inspectorate to report on the contributions made in this area. Community cohesion was defined by what was then called the Department for Children, Schools and Families as:

working towards a society in which there is a **common vision** and **sense of belonging** by all communities; a society in which the diversity of people’s backgrounds and circumstances is appreciated and valued; a society in which similar **life opportunities** are available to all; and a society in which strong and positive relationships exist and continue to be developed in the workplace, in schools and in the wider community. (Department for Children, Schools, and Families, 2007, p. 3, emphases in original)

A COMMON SCHOOL APPROACH?

In many other parts of the world, socializing children in an attempt to build community cohesion has been attempted by educating children from

different backgrounds together in the same school. Notable examples of this are the integrated schools in Northern Ireland where children from Catholic and Protestant backgrounds are taught together, though this sector only accounts for some 5% of the overall school population. This process is far from straightforward as data from both the United States and Canada show.

Since the 1950s, the United States has sought to achieve greater social and economic equality through a process of school desegregation—policies designed to educate children from different ethnic and racial groups in the same school buildings. The United States Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) stands out for the conclusion that “separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.” Although the case had a very specific application (questions that arose when states either required or permitted separate educational facilities for Black students on the condition that those schools be equal to schools for White children in terms of physical facilities, books, teacher salaries, etc.), the implications for schooling in the United States were very broad. In part, the court concluded that “to separate [minority students] from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone.” We will discuss some of the consequences of this decision in Chapter 7 on the United States, but we believe the principle has application beyond US borders. The argument in the case includes the idea that children should have access to the ideas of peers from other groups as a necessary part of a fair and equal education. Early successes of this approach converted the heavily segregated Southern states into the most racially integrated schools in the country, but the trend did not last (Orfield, 2001; Frankenberg, Lee, & Orfield, 2003), and a process of resegregation gained momentum through the 1990s. Bigg (2007) reported that after more than 50 years school segregation was on the rise as a result of the growing numbers of Hispanic students in U.S. schools.

In Canada, a more deliberate step toward resegregation came in response to demands from Afro-Canadian scholars; the Toronto Board of Education created an “Africentric” school in an effort to reduce school dropout rates among Black students (“Board Okays Black-Focused School,” 2008). The action was approved with a very close vote after years of controversy (e.g., Kalinowski & Brown, 2005). In Israel, there have also been efforts to educate Jewish and Arab children in the same school with both Hebrew and Arabic accorded equal status (Bekerman, 2004; McGlynn, Zembylas, Bekerman, & Gallagher, 2009), but here too the number of schools involved is less than 1% of the total school population.

The extent to which educating children together under one roof will reach the majority of children in any one country is limited by the fact that many countries also wish to give parents the right to choose the type of school they send their children to. In some cases, this is out of respect for the right

4 *Online Learning and Community Cohesion*

of parents to choose schools that have a religious ethos, while elsewhere, for example in England, offering parents a choice of schools since the 1980s has been a way of trying to raise educational standards by making schools compete with each other for pupils (see Chapter 3). In the United States, “choice” is a political code word for schooling reform that seeks to increase the availability of private schools and charter schools—and like parental choice elsewhere, contributes to reducing children’s school contact with peers from different groups. One of the consequences of parental choice is that many children grow up leading separate, parallel lives with relatively little contact with others who are different from themselves.

In Israel, for example, we will see that some 50% of children attend secular Jewish schools, around 30% attend Orthodox Jewish schools, and 20% attend Arab-Israeli schools, but until recently there was little or no contact between them. Our chapters on Northern Ireland, England, and the United States also provide evidence of the same phenomenon.

THE PLACE OF CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

To ensure that all children, irrespective of the type of school they attended, are provided with opportunities to become good citizens and to acquire knowledge, skills, and values that will help them function in diverse communities, many governments in the Western hemisphere have since the 1980s put considerable emphasis on citizenship education (Crick, 1998). In many countries, citizenship classes are mandatory, and in some cases, such as Northern Ireland, the subject of external examination. Citizenship courses are often built around the principles of respect for diversity, an appreciation of democratic principles and accountability, and the need to use dialogue to resolve conflict (Crick, 1998). However, according to Osler (2000) and Davies (2004), citizenship education has not always lived up to these noble aspirations and can struggle to handle differences between ethnic or religious groups. Moreover, in schools where citizenship classes have been taught to a broadly homogeneous population, it seems reasonable to ask whether an academic course of study, on its own, can provide the range of experiences that young people need to cope with cultural, ethnic, or religious differences. If not, what are the kinds of experiences that will bring about change, and what part of that can take place in schools?

PEACE EDUCATION

Attempts to address these types of difference have been the focus of numerous peace education initiatives. A recent summary of work in this area edited by Salomon and Cairns (2010) showed the remarkably diverse number of approaches that have been taken in many countries to promote peace

education both in schools and in higher education. One of the themes they explore which has particular resonance for this book was the contribution played by schemes which promoted contact between groups of young people. For example, in writing about a scheme which linked Catholic and Protestant pupils in Northern Ireland, where only 5% of students attend integrated schools, Gallagher (2010) notes that the “Cross-Community Contact” scheme was set up and funded by the Department of Education in Northern Ireland from 1982. At that time, the assumption was made that “contact” meant face-to-face contact. The scheme was based on two schools, one from each side of the community, organizing a day when their pupils met and spent time together, often visiting a museum or taking part in some educational activity. The limitations of that scheme have been well documented; the chief inspector for schools noted in 2004 that only 21% of pupils in primary schools had taken part and in secondary schools it was a mere 3% (DENI, 2004). Other criticisms were based on the lack of opportunity for young people to address key issues around cultural difference (O’Connor, Hartop, & McCully, 2002).

More recently, attempts have been made to encourage schools to share facilities and teaching across communities in Northern Ireland (Borooah & Knox, 2012); while the impact of this is still too early to assess, we note that the assumption behind the “Shared Education Programme” is that pupils will travel from one school to another, rather than make use of shared courses delivered online, as has been the case in Newfoundland (e.g., Brown & Barry, 2008; Stevens, 2008).

However, other face-to-face contact schemes, like the Schools Linking Network in England, set up shortly after the 2001 race riots in Bradford, appear to have been much more successful in nurturing positive relationships between White and British-Asian pupils. As we show in Chapter 4 of the current volume, this was at least in part attributable to a much clearer understanding of the importance of long-term contact and the need for adequate professional development for teachers. Interestingly from our point of view, neither of the schemes in England and Northern Ireland made much use of ICT to link schools and more broadly, Salomon and Cairns (2010) contains no reference to the use of the Internet as a tool for connecting schools or young people to enable them to work together in ways that could contribute to mutual understanding.

THE PLACE OF VIRTUAL CONTACT

We were aware that as far back as 1986, the Internet had been used in precisely these ways (Austin, 1992; Hunter, 1990) and that investment by governments since then has accelerated the potential for many similar programs. Through classroom projects or their individual explorations with social media, young people are getting to know one another across

geographic and cultural boundaries. Use of the Internet is not, of course, always friendly or supportive. When it is not managed carefully by skillful teachers and mediators, it can exacerbate problems. It can be a prime vehicle for cyberbullying—persistent victimization of weaker students using electronic media (including telephones). In 2008, Smith, Mahdavi, Carvalho, Fisher, Russell, and Tippett reported the results of a 2006 survey of 92 adolescents in 14 London schools and found that 22% reported having experienced some cyberbullying. In follow-up focus groups, the students said they thought the actual percentage would be higher (from 67% to 100%) and argued that many students would fail to report due to embarrassment. These results are consistent with those obtained by Li (2006) in Calgary, Canada: in a survey of 264 grade 7 to 9 students in Calgary, she found 25% of males and 25.6% of females reported having experienced cyberbullying. Li also says, “As suggested by the data, most victims and bystanders do not report cyberbullying incidents” (p. 166). In a larger and more recent Canadian study, Wade and Beran (2011) reported surveying 529 students age 10 to 17 attending ethnically diverse schools in a Midwestern Canadian city and found 21.9% had experienced cyberbullying. In 2012, the journal *School Psychology International* devoted a special issue to cyberbullying with articles that demonstrate that this is an international phenomenon.

Even with the possible risks of unregulated contact via the Internet, it seems reasonable to ask again some questions we may have thought had been answered long ago: what is a community and what holds communities together? And in the light of ubiquitous information and communications technologies, we also need to examine the ways in which the needs of communities are facilitated or hindered by technology.

In this work, we seek to address only a part of those questions. We want to focus on the ways that schools are using information and communication technologies (ICT) or computer-mediated communication (CMC) to help young people develop a more inclusive sense of community. We are especially interested in communities that have been fractured by interethnic conflict, racial prejudice, or religious divisions.

THE CONTACT HYPOTHESIS AND VIRTUAL CONTACT

We will examine some particular cases from around the world and will seek to understand the extent to which they have been shaped by theoretical models, such as Allport's Contact Hypothesis (1954). He asserted that more frequent contact between members of different groups may diminish the extent to which members of those groups subscribe to prejudicial views of the other group. One reason for providing a detailed analysis of this theory is that, according to two researchers, Ellison and Powers (1994), it has remained “one of the most durable ideas in the sociology of racial and

ethnic relations.” (p. 385) While there have been some refinements of the theory and some criticisms, discussed below, we argue that a thoughtful application of this model to empirical practice, where ICT is a core element, warrants close scrutiny. We make this case because the accessibility of the Internet, its flexibility, and its low cost might provide the means for widespread, cost-effective dissemination of good practice. But first, we explain what the Contact Hypothesis is and how research on this powerful model has evolved from early analysis of its impact on face-to-face contact and, more recently, on virtual contact via the Internet.

The Contact Hypothesis has been seen as a way to reduce the intergroup bias that frequently occurs because people identify themselves not only as individuals but also as members of a social group to which they belong. This ingroup, according to Social Categorization Theory (SCT; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986) sets itself apart from out-groups on the basis of clear social categories such as culture, race, or religion. Bias between groups can manifest itself in cognitive, affective, and behavioral ways according to Dovidio, Gaertner, and Kawakami (2003).

Allport’s work suggested that it was not contact *per se* between different groups that was likely to lead to a reduction in prejudice but that particular conditions surrounding the contact should be met. After nearly half a century of research on the theory, Pettigrew (1998a) and Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) reviewed the literature and posed some significant refinements that would add to the robustness of contact as a means of reducing prejudice. Allport originally proposed that contact between groups would reduce prejudice toward members of the “other” group if four conditions were met:

- equal status of the groups within the contact situation;
- common goals;
- intergroup cooperation; and
- support from authorities, law, or custom.

Pettigrew showed that the early research supported the hypothesis when all of these conditions were met and that less positive results were obtained when only some of the conditions were met. In some instances where prejudice increased, Pettigrew shows that the conditions were not met.

Pettigrew (1998b; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) also points to later research studies that report successes with a variety of groups including Chinese students in the United States, interracial workers in South Africa, German and Turkish school children, and Australians and Americans getting to know Southeast Asian immigrants. Hasler and Amichai-Hamburger (2013) have provided a very comprehensive review of research on each of these conditions and reached the conclusion that in some cases, the Internet is “uniquely suited to set out these conditions, and may even be more effective (than face to face) in putting the Contact Hypothesis into practice” (p.