

Children Tutoring Seniors at internet Skills: an Experiment Conducted at one Israeli Elementary School

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INTRODUCTION

The Internet which connects about 200 million people and millions of pages, voice , sound, image and video files has become a most powerful tool in the hands of those who know how to navigate it .The opportunity to use this powerful tool exists and is open to most strata of the population, regardless of the limitations of age, education, etc. Though the opportunity exists what actually happens is that the gap between Internet surfers and those who are not knowledgeable in Internet skills, is ever growing. The gap is widening between youngsters, the primary Internet user population, and adults and mostly seniors,who are not skilled at using a computer or the Internet.

In the new Hi-Tech world, where children speak the new language of the Internet as their mother tongue, it would be most fitting to put their mastery to good use and train them to teach this new language to Senior Citizens, those unacquainted with the language of the Internet.

This latter age group might find much interest and relevant, useful information via the net; they can study on-line, meet new people via the Internet, find useful information, participate in on-line interest groups, and contribute from their experience and knowledge and most importantly feel connected. An experiment was conducted in one elementary school in Israel; the Alon School in 1999, where ten Seniors were tutored by ten children aged 11-14.

In the l'ouverture school in Wichita, Kansas, Anna is teaching Internet skills to six adults. Anna is 9 years old, she is in 3rd grade. Anna and her classmates taught Internet skills to 60 adults, in one year. (1)

We are now at a unique crossroads in human history. Due to the innovative developments in technology and especially in information technology (IT) young children master very often computer and Internet skills far better than adults. It's the adults who are like immigrants in a new country, the country of Hi-Tech. As often is the case in a country absorbing immigrants it's the children who teach their parents the local language. (2)

In the L'ouverture school students learn Internet skills in kindergarten. By the time they attend 3rd grade, every child has his/hers homepage, which they themselves built, on the Internet.

In this Hi-Tech world where children are fluent in the internet language as if it were their mother tongue, it would most appropriate to put their knowledge to good use and to have them train others, in this case adults, in the language of IT.

The Knowledge Shift wherein children master knowledge much needed by adults, is creating new learning and social interactions.

In many schools, in different countries, children teach Internet skills to their parents and to other adults. In the Zippori Center near Jerusalem, a unique summer camp took place last summer.

young ones brought their mastery of technology and the grandparents their knowledge of the English language, which is still the *lingua franca* of the Internet. In Israel, as you may know, the language spoken is Hebrew.

Another experiment that of elementary school children training seniors in Internet skills was conducted in the Alon school, in Israel, last year- May-June 1999.

THE VIRTUAL COLLEGE FOR THE THIRD AGERS AND HOW IT ALL STARTED

It all started with the Virtual College for Senior Citizens which is an initiative of the College Department in the Ministry of Education in Israel.(3) We, (I am using the 'we' form since I am heading this project), at the College Department felt that the new technologies could revolutionize the existing social system and serve as a powerful tool to give senior citizens an opportunity to obtain asynchronous education regardless of age, previous education and location constraints as well as making them part of the new order the IT is creating. In light of the above the Virtual College for Senior Citizens was developed.

While working on the development of the Virtual College for the Third Agers, we realized that though the number of seniors using the Internet is on the rise, many are still lacking in Internet skills.

Some Data

There are about 600000 seniors 65+ in Israel. About 9/8% own their own PC (figures according to 1997 census.)Israel population is about 6000000. (4) 800000 are connected to the Internet .A very optimistic, non-official estimation suggests that about 10% of the surfers are Third Agers. I doubt very much this "rosey" estimation. However, whatever the exact number maybe, still many Third Agers are not skilled in using the Internet.

We, at the College Department, decided to use the knowledge of young children in IT in order to train seniors in Internet skills thus creating new social interactions.

I am a great believer in the need for knowledge to be passed on. The Israeli government has invested so much in schools both in equipment and in teaching the youngsters computer and Internet skills that it would be only logical to put this accumulation of knowledge into use, in this case for the benefit of the Senior community.

The Alon school, in the Mate Yehuda region was chosen for a mini experiment. Before introducing the Alon School I would like to point out that the uniqueness of the experiment at the Alon School, as far as the Israeli scene is concerned, lies in the fact that elementary school children served as teachers. We didn't know of the L'ouverture activity, of which we learnt much later. The idea to work with younger children and not with high school students, something more common in Israel, was mine and it met with skepticism and much criticism. Most of the members of the Steering Committee of the Virtual College for the Third Agers were against it, they preferred to have high school students as teachers.

I was adamant; in this case I am glad I was. I felt that the younger students would be less cynical, more giving and patient than the older ones. My choice paid off.

About the Alon School

The Alon School is an elementary school in the Mate Yehuda Council, about 20km. from Jerusalem, at its southern entrance. The school serves a mixed population 1-8, from three Kibbutzim near Jerusalem two Moshavim (communal settlements) and new urban communities.

It would be most appropriate to note that it has always been in the Kibbutz tradition to care for the community; the Kibbutz still has a highly developed social structure in which the elderly work even at a fairly old age and are well cared for. Therefore, when I approached the headmistress of the Alon school and asked her if she would be willing to run an experiment, where children from 5th grade on would be teaching Internet skills to the Third Agers, she was rather enthusiastic.

I serve as an academic adviser to the school and thus am quite knowledgeable about the students mastery of Internet skills. The Alon school, under my guidance, has fully integrated the computer skills and IT in the classroom.

Getting Seniors to Participate

I have already mentioned that the Alon School is part of the Mate Yehuda Regional Council. In order to reach interested Third Agers we met with the head of the education department and with the coordinator of senior activities in the council. The latter advertised the project in the various towns and settlements, including Kibbutzim in the region and soon we had 10 candidates, all 55+.

Preparing for the Implementation of the Experiment

The next step was to find a teacher who would run the project in the school and serve as a liaison between me and the children and between the children and the seniors. Michal who is a Kibbutz member, a teacher and who also works at the Kibbutz guesthouse, was appointed head of project. Marilyn, the school's computer coordinator volunteered to come and help every other week. Michal and myself had several meetings and decided upon the following steps:

- developing criteria for choosing the young teachers
- training the young teachers
- deciding upon topics to be taught
- choosing methods of teaching
- documenting the experiment

USING A CLOSED NETWORK, IN HEBREW, AS A PLATFORM FOR COMMUNICATION AND DOCUMENTATION

In addition to frequent use of the Internet for school work, the Alon school is using The FirstClass outdated 2.6 version as its "intranet". 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, I believe, the best "intranet" one could find in Hebrew.

The Alon students are connected to the TelHi network, at school and from home. A forum for the experiment was opened on the network. Each old learner was given an ID and a password, so that they would become part of the school's on line community. We also wanted to make sure that the process would be fully documented both by the "young teachers" and the "old learners".

This paper is based upon the careful documentation of the process, as written in the aforementioned forum.

Recruiting "Teachers"

Michal met with the school's Computer and Net Committee and told the members of the committee about the project. She asked them to help recruit the "young teachers". A suggestion was made to use the school's "intranet" to publicize the project. A decision was made to take only volunteers, knowledgeable in Internet skills, but first and foremost kind and patient.

Ten children 5th grade to 8th grade, boys and girls, volunteered to come to school on their day off to teach the Third Agers. Fearing some of the children will get tired after a couple of sessions we had 5 more volunteers as stand by.

Meeting with the "Young Teachers"

Michal and myself met with the "young teachers". We emphasized the importance of being patient, speaking clearly and loud, allowing time for practice, not helping the old learners, unless asked for, (children tend to click the mouse instead of waiting for adults who might be somewhat slower) and documenting the learning process. Together, the children, Michal and I, decided upon terms and topics to be taught. Each child prepared a file for his/her student including a glossary of Internet terms and a list of search engines.

The Course

The course duration was 5 weeks. The "young teachers" and the "old learners" met on Fridays. The Alon school, unlike most of the Israeli schools operates 5 days only as part of an experiment conducted by the Ministry of Education. The "young teachers" were ready to give up their day off in order to train the seniors. They had to get up early, and be ready for the school bus to come and pick them up. Each session lasted 3 hours from 8:30-11:30 with one break around 9:45. During the break teachers and students had the opportunity to eat, drink and socialize.

The Process

The first meeting was held on May 25, 1999. The headmistress of the Alon school opened the session and gave the participants a short survey of the history of the Internet. One of the parents of the "young teachers" videotaped the meeting. At the end of each meeting both teachers and learners documented the learning and teaching process in the forum dedicated for this project, in the TelHi network. The following are most of the comments, suggestions and instructions as documented in the aforementioned forum.

The First Meeting

1-"Young Teachers"

- *"Today I taught S. how to conduct a search on the Internet and find sites containing information she was looking for. It was somewhat hard in the beginning, but we overcame all the difficulties." I, 13 y/o*

And another "teacher" writes:

- *"Today we had the first meeting with the adults.*
- *It was OK, because R. whom I am tutoring is nice and a fast learner, so it wasn't difficult at all. I really had a good time and I think the next meeting will be good too. I think R. learnt many new things today about the Internet and computers in general. What she learnt today will be useful when she surfs the Internet by herself, at home. To sum up, it was a good day and I think it will be just as good (if not better) next time." T. 12 y/o*
- *Another "teacher" makes the following comments: "I liked the first meeting a lot. I hope that Sh. learnt a great deal. He really understood a lot for someone [who used the Internet] for the first time. I think that the session went exactly as it should: short and to the point. In my opinion, the Internet is a great thing especially for the elderly who*

have lots of free time. In short, I hope the next session will be as successful and that the seniors enjoy all the lessons, and we too! M 11y/o

2-The "Older Learners"

And what did the "older learners" have to say after the first meeting? Here are their comments:

- *I am most grateful to T. for his patience. Z. 70+ The first session with L. was very successful as far as I am concerned. I hope L. had the same impression. I'll do my best to get the software so that I can practice at home. See you next week. R. 65 I learnt how to conduct a search on the Internet.*
- *I learnt that even at my age one can learn new things. I learnt not to be afraid. This, I believe, is our [the Third Agers] greatest problem. S. 65+*
- *I really enjoyed getting acquainted with the innovations of the end of this century. I am most grateful to S. for her patience, and being up to the challenge to minimize the paradoxical gap between adults and children who are the age of our grandchildren. I am eagerly looking forward to our next meeting. Thanks and see you [next week] IL 55+*
- *The school's headmistress, Ada Mandel, was very much involved in the process. In the forum "Children Tutoring Seniors" she wrote the following:*
- *"Today you opened a window to the world of the Internet [to ten seniors] The meeting was very successful due to your patience, vast knowledge and your desire to share your knowledge with others. Your act of volunteering filled me, Michal, Edna and all the others involved in the project with joy and pride. Your deed is a deed of kindness and of true social involvement. You have given the "older learners" an entrance ticket to the world of computer and the Internet. Good luck in the coming sessions. Ada*

At Home

The tutors were thrilled. They kept talking about the project at home. They felt they were doing something meaningful and beneficial.

One mother, M. told us the following:

My daughter doesn't stop talking about "her old lady". The entire house revolves around L's "old lady". The other day she called her on the phone and wanted to know what she was really interested in so that she could better prepare for the next meeting. "L., added the mother, "hates waking up early, but now she does it out of her own free will on Fridays."

Re-assessing the Method of Teaching

Michal and myself met with the children once a week, in school, to get feedback and to plan for the next meeting. After the first two sessions in which we paired a "young teacher" with an "older learner", the children felt that this was not the right way and suggested another method which we adopted. The model they came up with was that of "expert stations": instead of a teacher knowing all and teaching all the material to his/her learner, each "young teacher" taught only what he/she felt he /she knew best and the learners moved from one expert to another, as in musical chairs.

Topics

Michal made sure that the experts go over their areas of expertise before they met with their students. Enclosed is what she wrote in the forum on the TelHi network:

- *In today's meeting we decided to change the teaching method. The method to be used will be that of "expert stations"; each teacher will devote 20 minutes to a learner.*

- *The areas of expertise will be the following, as decided: O- Chat, T- e mailing, Y-downloading, copying and pasting, Im- basic html, U- advertising a site, N-shopping on the Internet ,L-listening to the radio on the Internet, Sh+S-power point*
- *And indeed the change in the method of teaching as suggested by the children, turned out to be most beneficial.*
- *"Today I learnt many new things: listening to the radio, writing about a topic and downloading pictures. I hope I'll remember everything." Sh. "Each lesson is more interesting than the previous one. Today, due to the new method, I enjoyed the meeting immensely.I learnt how to shop on the internet.L.*
- *And what have the "young teachers" to say about this teaching innovation? "I enjoyed teaching about shopping on the Internet. I got to know other students (the old learners) and really enjoyed teaching them. I think this is a good idea and that we should continue teaching this way." N.*

The last session

In the last session, the "young teachers" spontaneously, came up with the idea of taking a computer apart and showing its components to their students, who have never seen the inside of a computer before. This on the spot decision and the way it was carried out turned out to be one of the highlights of the course.

At the end of the last meeting the older learners summarized their impressions of the course and tipped us as to what future courses should be:

- *"Today, 25/6/99 is our last meeting for the time being. I would like to note that I learnt a great deal in the lessons we had.However, I didn't practice at home and I don't know how I'll cope [with the Internet] without the children's help.I think it would be most advisable to continue this course after the summer vacation. By then we'll have many more questions.I would like to thank L. and all the children who took part in this project.I would also like to thank all the adults who devoted their time and energy to this interesting initiative. R. 55+*
- *"At the end of the project I would like to express our satisfaction. The "young teachers" were very kind and patient. I am sure it was not easy for them not to touch the mouse and to wait for us to do that. I gained much self assurance [from the process] . I am not afraid of the computer anymore. I am very grateful to all the teachers and all the other people who helped get this project off the ground.L.*
- *"For the last 5 sessions I had the opportunity of becoming acquainted with the computer in general and the Internet in particular.*
- *It was very interesting to learn a skill which as far as I am concerned was unattainable and this was quite embarrassing. Now I feel its possible even at my age. If we only practiced more and believed in ourselves...The idea of children teaching Seniors Internet skills was most enjoyable and beyond our expectations.I [still] don't feel quite at ease with the computer and the Internet but have a strong feeling its possible.I would like to thank the initiators of the project and the teachers, and to extend a special thank you to my lovely, patient teacher-L. With much love and appreciation. A p.s. we would love to have the children come for a visit.*
- *We, the S. family, would like to thank the initiators and organizers of this great idea, and first and foremost all the children who were great teachers: they were endlessly patient; they had patience even for those amongst us who were slow learners.I hope we'll make use of our knowledge.We have overcome our fear of the computer.This is a huge step for us, the old ones, in the direction of year 2000. Thanks from the S. family Zuba (a kibbutz).*

- *Today, Friday 25.6.99 I graduated Internet 101. I enjoyed it very much and derived special joy from the work with my teachers- the children.*
- *I'll never reach their level of expertise, but I find it very important to have [some basic knowledge] in the field. In my opinion, courses like this one must continue, so as to bridge the generation gap. I think this is a real blessing for the older generation. I hope there will be a continuation. Sh.*

Some things need to be improved. Two learners were more critical of the process:

To summarize the two first sessions were very good and I learnt a lot of new things . Then, my tutor didn't show up.

- *She left in the middle. I had no private tutor even though we started working according to a new method: we went from one tutor to another and each taught us something new and different. I liked this method a lot. The last session was somewhat wasted; not all the teachers showed up and most of the time I worked on my own. Still this had its merits as I practiced a lot and learnt from my own mistakes. Thanks to all the lovely children. R.*
- *This experiment] proves that children can teach Internet skills to seniors. The idea is good and feasible. However, more attention should be given to the mental and intellectual gap [between the older learners and the young teachers.] This gap necessitates more preparation.*
- *The young teachers should have a detailed lesson plan [in front of them] suitable for the more [structured] way of learning of the older learner.*
- *May I suggest that at the end of each session, the older learner be given an assignment such as finding a site on the Internet or sending an e-mail message. It would also be advisable to have the course evaluated. Thank you all .M.*

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

very successful. However, we encountered a few difficulties and drew conclusions as to future courses.

Tiredness

About half of the "young teachers" got tired of the task after three meetings and five of them left in the middle. It was good that we had some tutors as stand by , we asked them to step in, and they did.

At the initial stages, we explained to the young volunteers that once they start tutoring it's a commitment and they can't leave in the middle. They all said they would "stick to the end", but they didn't. What we would like to do in future courses is to have two groups of "young teachers" teach the course, each three sessions. The course duration then would be six weeks and not five.

Structure

Michal, Marilyn, the headmistress and myself were sure the course was well structured. Since all four of us are great surfers we didn't realize that the course should have been more tightly structured. We were also carried away by the children's ability to create structure out of chaos, hyperlinks and endless undirected surfing. We learnt from the mini experiment that adult learners need a more structured, linear approach.

Not being Consistent

Though we were very careful as far as documenting the project is concerned, we failed to ask the children—our "young teachers" to write their impressions and to give

us feedback in writing, in the last session. They did give us feedback in our oral discussion, but one can't rely on one's fickle memory.

SOME MORE OBSERVATIONS

On being Patient

The adult learners, all 55+, were extremely grateful to their teachers for their patience. There wasn't a single learner who didn't mention this point. This brings to mind the following questions: 1. are we that impatient towards the Third Aged that being patient comes as such an outstanding gesture to the "older learner"? Or 2. is it the myth that older people are so slow to learn that underlies the learners' attitude?

In his book The Nine Myths of Aging, Douglas Powell (5) debunks the most prevalent myths about aging and amongst them that "old dogs can't learn new tricks". We could gather from the information presented and from my close supervision of the project that all the seniors learnt "new tricks" i.e; using the Internet, being part of a communication network, the TelHi Network, and even making power point presentations, which the children taught the seniors as a "bonus".

The children weren't only patient they were also tolerant of the other. They accepted the seniors. With all their limitations. There was no ridicule, no cynicism. I believe there was much gratitude on both sides.

The children's being tolerant helped alleviate the seniors' fear of technology: the computer and the Internet.

On Being a Teacher

It was most interesting to note how regardless of age and experience the children became almost typical teachers, caring about how much their learners absorbed, worried about being understood, desiring that what they taught would be useful and wanting very much to live up to their students expectations. The seniors became learners. good ones. They worried about practicing what they learnt, hurt when their own private tutor left and fearing they might not remember everything they learnt.

CONCLUSIONS

There is much talk about the changing role of the schools in the Information age. Many educationists point out to the need for value and character education, and to greater involvement in the community.

The mini experiment in the Alon School combined both: the "young teachers" combined their knowledge of the Information Technologies with the values of volunteering, tolerance, patience, responsibility, caring, commitment, understanding of the other and giving of one.

It wasn't academic learning, it was real life doing. Much of the success of the project lies in its being meaningful. There is much talk about the shallowness, the zapping way in which our youngsters behave and act.

Give them a meaningful real life task to do and we'll see how responsible and deep they are.

Programs such as the one I have just described should start at the elementary schools, so that they may become a way of life.

I strongly believe that the new technologies are handing us new opportunities for bridging gaps in society such as the intergeneration gap and for planning for a better future in which social involvement and caring is a commandment to live by.

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