

Civic media as a cultural dialogue: A professional development journey of Arab and Jewish teachers via documentary filmmaking in Israel

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Abstract

Eighteen Arab and Jewish teachers of civic education and communication studies took part in a national professional development for peace education at the Israeli Center for Educational Technology from 2016 to 2018. They created documentaries as a way to have a cultural dialogue. While learning to produce a documentary as a form of reflection, the participants deepened their dialogues and challenged their own perspectives of the Jewish-Arab conflict. Each participant represented her/his cultural heritage by producing a personal narrative that was analyzed through the media literacy critical questions. This case study provides an insight about challenges and affordances of media literacy as an approach to civic education in conflict areas such as Israel.

Keywords: Civic media, Intercultural communication, identity, Arab-Israeli conflict, professional development, media production

Introduction

In the summer before the 2006 Lebanon War, Cinema, Communication, and Civics teachers of Arab and Jewish origin met for a series of seminars that aimed to break down the wall of hostility and create a dialogue about the “elephant in the room”—the Jewish-Arab conflict. We knew that we were not going to stop the war; all we wanted was to get to know each other. We worked together in the seminars but we were still full of stereotypes and negative feelings, and certain about our own righteousness. The first meeting was very emotional and promising, and then two weeks later the war broke. We thought that these events would ruin what we had just started to build in the seminars. However, all the rounds of the conflict that happened since then only strengthened the connection between us and kept us on an island of sanity in the sea of hatred. We understood that we had a tool for bridging this gap by simply meeting, talking, and getting to know each other. Inspired by that first

experience with teachers, for more than ten years we have been bringing Arab and Jewish students together to create collaborative videos. Our studies illustrated how these encounters have a short-term effect on students' empathy and their ability to acknowledge each other's narrative (Friesem, 2015; Ratner, 2015).

Other research shows that in order to have effective peace education its effect needs to be maintained through regular encounters and by helping students to stay connected (Salomon, 2006; Salomon & Crane, 2011). This experience helped us understand that teachers also need to have their own regular seminars. Year after year, Arab and Jewish teachers have been meeting and having their own students meet in order to maintain these relationships. Cinema has the power of telling stories to help us identify with characters and to affect viewers. Cinema has the power to foster empathy towards the others' narrative, because it tells personal stories that are more difficult to argue with. Creating a collaborative and yet personal video allows for a place where both Arab and Jewish stories can be told. The equality that does not exist in reality has a place in the movies.

The twenty percent Arab minority in Israel is mainly Muslim, but also contains Christians and Druze. Their cultural heritage and identity are challenged daily as they represent an Arabic speaking minority in a country with a significant Hebrew speaking Jewish majority. This case study provides an insight about challenges as well as affordances of media literacy as an approach to civic education in conflict areas such as Israel. Based on our own observations and the participants' reflection, we demonstrate how the process of learning to produce a documentary as a form of deliberation promoted deep and challenging dialogue between the Arab and Jewish teachers. Each participant represented her/his cultural heritage by producing a personal narrative.

This study examines one collaborative documentary filmmaking within the framework of the bi-national program "Dialogue through Cinema." As part of a national professional development at the Center for Educational Technology from 2016 to 2018, eighteen Arab and Jewish teachers of civic education and communication studies created documentaries as a way to have a cultural dialogue for the purpose of peace education. Furthermore, being part of a conflict

area, the teachers challenged stereotypes by reducing negative feelings and strengthening the legitimacy of each other's narrative. At the same time, the yearlong program applied the creation of personal narratives through the filmmaking process so that the teachers could experience intercultural communication while learning to use media literacy education. The structure of the professional development was based upon the process of learning contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 2008) while practicing media literacy to analyze, create, and reflect on each other's personal narratives (Hobbes, 2010; Bar On & Adwan, 2006).

Peace Education

The insights from this case study showcase the extent to which peace education can be effective using practices of civic media. "Education for peace provides a rather complex tackling of collective narratives embedded in mutual historic memories, collective beliefs, the perception of personal and group identity, and high sensitivity to anything related to the conflict" (Salomon & Essawi, 2009, p. 18) These narratives are part of their society's hegemony that maintains the conflict. Peace and coexistence education hinder that hegemony by providing lenses that help recognize the legitimacy of the other as an individual (Bar-Tal, 2004). In addition, both Bar-On and Adwan (2006) and Salomon (2006) claimed that in order to reduce stereotypes, foster empathy, and eventually find the way to overcome the conflict, one must acknowledge, be sensitive to and recognize the legitimacy of the other's narrative.

Beckerman et al. (2004) studied bilingual (Hebrew and Arabic) schools in Israel and they showed a different picture. The mutual base and learning allow each side of the conflict to express their cultural voice. Beckerman et al. claimed that these schools are an island of equality and collaboration where the two groups coexist as if there were no inequality outside of the school walls. The authors emphasized the secular background and high social economical status of Arab and Jewish students. They observed how the students used cultural traditions to represent their group and how by doing that they were trying to express a civic multicultural and liberal voice in the spirit of piece education and coexistence.

Zoubi (2007) examined how being a part of a

soccer team that combines players from two different nations can create a ripple effect—positive influence that goes beyond actual participants. He found that a long-lasting mutual goal contributes to a positive change in participants' friends and family. When initiatives provide participants with long-term support, they can impact the relationship between the two rival groups thus meeting goals of peace education.

Democracy requires functioning, engaged, and literate citizens. Media literacy teachers should acquire 21st century skills in order to transfer them to their students. The findings of our study show that civic education can benefit from incorporating media production as a form of dialogue that advances social responsibility and community engagement essential for today's digital citizenship.

The purposeful and guided process of creating videos in an educational and social setting invites students to participate in meaningful emotional process as they are addressing these dilemmas (Shalita, Friedman, & Harten, 2011). The unique pedagogy of media production and film-making allows students to experience teamwork, deadlines, and adaptation of an idea into a script and then into a movie (Friesem, 2017). All of that helps students who are working together to advance towards emotional maturity. The process of producing a video includes constant reflection on opinions, positions, and cultural meanings. As part of the creative and collaborative work students explore their identities in regards to the subject of the film and to group dynamics. Students learn to solve interpersonal conflicts that are an inherent part of working as a film crew.

Producing collaborative films allows Jewish and Arab students to tell their personal narratives as well as stories of their communities and nations through symbols that include sound, movement, and other tools of cinematic emotional manipulation that a written story cannot generate. Creating a movie is an artistic subjective expression of thoughts, emotions, motivations and fears that affect and control of the senses. Levin (2011) followed Jewish-Israeli high school students who produced videos for their capstone project. He claimed that the process of producing a movie allows teenagers to identify symbolic meaning in their lives. Movies that these teenagers created became a

tool for cultural expression as well as a way to bond as a group that created a dialogue between individuals as they were trying to represent themselves and the world they lived in. Asana (2015) explored youth media in Palestine. He found that young producers use transgressive messages to challenge cultural and social boundaries of their own lives under the Israeli occupation as a form of civic media.

Civic Media Education

Civic Media is defined by Henry Jenkins (2007) as “any use of any medium which fosters or enhances civic engagement” (Para 4). More recently, Ethan Zuckerman, the director of MIT center for civic media explained to PBS host, Alexander Heffner (2017) that it is a broad term that includes media created by people who hope to make social and political change. This definition adds the will to make a social and political change while Jenkins talked about civic engagement. Gordon and Mihailidis (2016) collected many case studies of civic media in their book to showcase their definition

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of civic media as “any mediated practice that enables a community to imagine themselves as being connected, not through achieving, but through striving for common good” (p. 2). In all three definitions, we can see that civic engagement, social and political change or connecting community to thrive for the common good are variations of the purpose of using media production.

We can find many examples of media literacy activities that practice civic engagement as part of producing media: a journalism inquiry, a hip hop music video, a digital campaign with a PSA to raise awareness, or simply documenting people and events that are usually not represented in the mainstream media (Hobbs, Donnelly, Friesem, & Moen, 2013; Jenkins, Shresthova, Gamber-Thompson, Kligler-Vilenchik, & Zimmerman, 2016; Tyner, 2003; Soep, 2014). The act of civic engagement has evolved with the increased use of digital devices and it is a different practice than what previous generations experienced (Levin & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2017). One of the most com-

mon use of digital media to make a social change has been producing a documentary (Goodman, 2003). In most of the research on youth media, documentary is described as a way to have youth inquire, explore, and engage with an issue that is relevant to their community (Asthana, 2012). While it provides opportunities for many marginalized youth to explore their agency (Halverson, 2010), making a collaborative documentary is a pathway for dialogue between groups in conflict (Ratner, 2015). Nevertheless, rarely do we turn the focus to the educators. For that reason, we explore how Arab and Jewish teachers practice civic media while taking a professional development in media literacy as part of a national civic engagement initiative.

Nasser & Moti Learning to Produce a Documentary

In one of the intercultural exchanges, Moti (pseudonym), a Jewish teacher who emigrated from Russia several years ago, talked about his trauma of living near a Mosque and hearing muezzin's calls for prayers in the early morning, disturbing his wife's sleep. When reflecting on Moti's comment, Nasser (pseudonym) a shy Arab media literacy teacher, shared that he was a muezzin himself.

empathic film teacher be an aggressive muezzin? The one who disrupted Moti's night sleep and his family's peace? It took Moti and Nasser two more meetings of collaborative exercises and hesitations until they decided to work together. Facilitators acknowledged that it is important that the goal of the mutual creation will come from participants themselves. They did not force them to choose a more difficult path. At some point one of the facilitators even suggested to both of them to produce different movies with other participants because he thought that the conflict was too painful: "It's like a victim meeting his aggressor and being asked to understand him". And yet, both Nasser and Moti decided to make a documentary together, visiting each other's home, temple, and village.

In the beginning, they considered telling the story through voice-over and decided to film the movie in Jerusalem where it all started — where Moti and his wife bought an apartment and discovered muezzin calls from four different mosques in the neighborhood. However, standing in front of the Dome of the Rock, the Islamic shrine located on the Temple Mount in the Old City of Jerusalem, they realized that *their relationship* is the story and decided to focus on the tension of their first encounter. Moti decided to visit the

mosque in Nasser's village. This visit was especially emotional, considering that Moti entered the mosque and listened to Nasser's call in the muezzin's beacon from close by. When both of them came back with the footage and screened it in class, all the other participants

were moved by the collaboration of the two teachers. Moti was sharing the experience of visiting the Arab village:

"It does not look like anything that we know. I've never ever visited Arabs and I discovered welcoming pleasant and generous people. I still cannot understand how they can shout those battle cries: 'Allā Hu 'Akbar' ('God Almighty')". For Muslims, this is part of the daily prayer—referring to God as just and greater than anything. However, for Israeli Jews, the phrase is as associated with the words that suicide terrorists say before activating their bombs.

The highlight of the collaborative documenta-

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This revelation was a defining moment as each of them was telling their story. In a shy voice Nasser explained how being a teacher was not enough to support his family and how all teachers in the Arab section had an additional job. Everybody was curious and asked questions about being a muezzin, starting from details about the profession, questions about the "muezzin law" (law that limits hours and volume of sound systems in public places). Moti was stunned and sat quietly. In his interview he reflected on how he was looking at Nasser at that moment and could not connect between early morning muezzin calls and the fellow teacher in front of him. How could a sensitive and

ry was when Nasser as a muezzin said “Allā Hu ‘Ak-bar” in the living room of the young Jewish-Russian couple. The emotional moment when Nasser calmly says the prayer in Moti’s living room increased empathy and encouraged both of them to acknowledge and celebrate each other’s cultural heritage. As we saw in Ratner’s (2015) research, making videos with personal or communal narrative enhances the connection between young film-makers and increases viewers’ empathy toward the characters’ narrative. Nasser’s prayer as a muezzin in Moti’s living room (the most private place) created a moment of empathy. “In the muezzin’s call I saw my grandfather who was a cantor in a synagogue and I still have goose bumps as I hear that voice,” said one Jewish viewer, a woman in her seventies whose grandfather was a cantor in a Jewish community outside of Israel. This moment of viewing together generated empathic reactions also among participants’ families who saw the film for the first time. These viewers’ did not know Nasser and Moti. Interestingly enough, Nasser and Moti’s movie became politically relevant. In a time when politicians are fighting over legislation that would forbid muezzins to call in the early hours of the morning, their movie was able to bring Jewish viewers a little bit closer to the issue and generate understanding and recognition of the legitimacy of each other’s narrative.

Conclusion

The program fostered coexistence and provided practical tools for peace education between Arabs and Jews in Israel. A yearlong collaboration between two teachers who participated in the program as they produced a joint documentary, reduced hostility, adverse emotions, and stereotypes while at the same time creating a will for recognition, contact, and legitimacy of each other’s narrative (Jewish and Arab). As we re-evaluate existing paradigms for teaching and learning about the impact and potential of media for democratic processes and civic engagement, this case study showcases a successful practice for fostering a cultural dialogue. In his article, Lan (2013) suggested a framework of democratic media literacy to include deliber-

ative, pluralistic and participatory practices. The story of Nasser and Moti is an example on how civic media can reduce stereotypes, foster empathy and offer a path to overcome the conflict. Making a collaborative documentary is a participatory action that includes a deliberate approach to acknowledge and be sensitive to the other’s narrative that leads to empathy and rec-

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ognition of the legitimacy of each other’s narrative. The educators practiced empathy and a deliberate democratic and civic action as part of producing a documentary. This case study offers a practice where media literacy education can advance civic engagement and be a model for professional development of teachers in conflict areas. ❄

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