Storytelling Among Israeli and Palestinian Children in the Era of Mobile Innovation

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Introduction

Research in the field of educational media and technology has tended to focus on the intersection of technology and learning. Some of the major themes in the field include: how to improve technological design; how to expand access to technology for disadvantaged populations; and how to use technology to improve instructional design and promote learning objectives (AECT, 2009; Kozma, 2000). These are important areas of research; however, promoting academic learning is only one of the many roles educational institutions play in our societies. We must recognize that formal education is an incredibly powerful institution in every society, which not only educates children, but also socializes them and instills them with national identities and values (Dewey, 1938; Meyer, 1977; Ramirez & Boli, 1987). Just as we do not limit our definition of technology to mere computers or connectivity, neither can we limit our definition of education so narrowly as academic achievement – or even learning.

This study emerged out of a desire to understand how educational technology can not only promote academic achievement, but also improve other social problems through its impact on education. Prior research has shown that schools are powerful socializing agents, and that educational media and technology, namely television, can influence children's attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors (Sanders, Montgomery, & Brechman-Toussaint, 2000; Zimmerman, 1996). Building off of this literature, we advocate a research agenda that investigates the role that newer educational technologies can play in socializing young people and shaping their identities, values, and characters, as well as their knowledge about the issues that shape their lives. Recognizing that technological innovation is re-defining the social

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world, condensing the time-space continuum and altering traditional boundaries, in this article, we explore how educational technology might be utilized to improve entrenched social problems, such as poverty, political conflict, and oppression by altering the way that young people think about, learn about, and experience these phenomena.

Prior literature is complete with myriad ways that technology is contributing to improving larger social problems, including by promoting small loans and entrepreneurship (Yunus, 1998), improving access to information about health (Istepanian, Laxminarayan, & Pattichis, 2005; Kaplan, 2006; Vilella et al., 2004), improving women's safety in regions of conflict, encouraging citizen journalism (Palen & Liu, 2007), and promoting cross-border dialogue among individuals (Austin et al., 2009). However, very little literature focuses on how these technologies can be combined with educational initiatives to improve the future of generations of children. With this in mind, we narrowed in on one specific social problem – entrenched political conflict – and questioned: how can we use educational technology in the service of peace education?

This paper presents a model for how educational technologies can be leveraged to promote peace education, by traversing national boundaries and encouraging the development of mutual understanding and a global sense of identity through storytelling. It presents initial findings from fieldwork conducted in Palestine in March 2010 and offers theoretical contributions to future studies on the role educational media and technology can play in supporting other intersections between education and social movements, including health education and financial literacy.

Borders and Conflict: The Case of Israel and Palestine

The idea that technology can link people across borders has become a platitude in the popular media today; but the focus on how technology can connect individuals across borders tends to obscure the fact that borders of all kinds still shape our social world and our lived experiences (Evans, 1997). In fact, for most of the world, movement across political boundaries is still highly restricted, and even accurate information about others beyond one's borders is difficult to obtain.

Moreover, in a world where the prevalence of inter-state conflict is largely declining (Sarkees, Wayman, & Singer, 2003), certain decades-long cross-border conflicts stand out as particularly glaring examples of where real and imagined categories between "us" and "them" are clearly delineated. The border between Israel and Palestine is one such border – a striking example of a political, cultural, religious, and militarized border. It is also the site of an ongoing, decades-long inter-state conflict, and as a result, its borders are laden with violence and struggle.

In such conflicts, violence becomes a constant part of young people's lives. For example, the Palestinian Ministry of Health reports that in the violent clashes in late 2008 and early 2009, more than 400 children in Gaza were killed by violence and 1,800 were wounded (UNICEF, 2009). As the victims and witnesses of violence,

adolescents in the West Bank and Gaza suffer long-term psychological damage from constant exposure to violence. A 2004 survey of 2,100 Palestinian youth aged 14–17 found that 99% of surveyed youth had experienced exposure to violence and that 35% of Gaza youth report suffering from symptoms characteristic of full post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and 11% reported symptoms characteristic of partial PTSD. Nearly 60% of both boys and girls exposed to violence in both the West Bank and Gaza report having functional impairment in school (Abdeen, Qasrawi, Nabil, & Shaheen, 2008).

Israeli youth have also suffered. Between when the Second (al-Asqa) Intifada broke out in September 2000 and the summer of 2001, reports that 20 Israeli youth under the age of 18 were killed and many more injured. Their research also finds that approximately 28% of youth in Jewish settlements outside the cities suffered from PTSD. A lower, but still substantial number of Israeli youth in Jerusalem (12.4%) and Gili (11.2%) also showed symptoms of moderate to severe post-traumatic stress (Solomon & Lavi, 2005).

When students grow up surrounded by violence, the goal of a lasting peace becomes ever more elusive. A Congressional Sub-Committee hearing in 2003 cites Palestinian polls that show that "72 to 80 percent of Palestinian children desire death [as religious martyrs]" (The US Senate, 2003). Similarly, Solomon and Lavi (2005) found that two-thirds of children living in the Israeli settlements, aged 11.5–15, rejected the idea of peace talks entirely, while approximately half of Israeli youth living in the cities of Jerusalem and Gili supported continued peace talks (Solomon & Lavi). These findings are simply striking because of how young the surveyed youth are, and how entrenched their views are concerning the potential for peace. With this in mind, we wondered what impact technology could have to traverse boundaries and promote mutual understandings among children, before their political views and perceptions of the conflict have become entirely entrenched.

Technology and Peace Education

Numerous types of peace education have been proposed to break the cycle of violence in Israel and Palestine, with varying levels of success. Recently, many researchers have begun to incorporate technology into their design to provide more authentic opportunities for connections between Israelis and Palestinians. This study aimed to investigate the impact that technology can have on peace education – however, even defining "peace education" is value-laden.

The definition, focus, and implementation of peace-related curricula vary tremendously across different national contexts in terms of ideology, curricular focus, practices, and objectives (Burns & Aspelagh, 1996). In fact, peace education worldwide ranges from focus on de-militarization and conflict resolution, to emphases on structural violence, economic inequality, environmental issues, and human rights. Despite these differences, Bar Tal (2002) explains that a shared objective is to make

the world a better and more humane place, "by reducing a variety of human ills such as injustice, inequality, prejudice and intolerance, the abuse of human rights, environmental destruction, violent conflict, war and other evils" (28).

Despite a deep and rich body of research on peace education initiatives, effective peace education is incredibly difficult to accomplish in places with deep-seated fears and prejudices born out of historical conflict, as it requires a fundamental redefinition of "us" and "them" and potentially, a re-conceptualization of personal and collective identities. Nonetheless, some empirical research suggests that peace education, and specifically, long, open, and honest encounters with individuals from the other side of the conflict, can have an impact on individual perceptions of the conflict and begin a process of understanding the other side (Feuerverger, 1997). For example, Feuerverger (1998) quotes a Palestinian student in stating: "I never really appreciated how afraid they were and that they had a right to that fear" (715). Although this re-conceptualization is the true foundation for a lasting peace in the region, Tomlinson and Benefield (2005) remind us that the impacted youth of such programs are few and far between (Tomlinson & Benefield).

In addition, others criticize the real efficacy of short encounter programs as an effective means to peace (Abu-Nimer, 1999; Bekerman, 2007; Halabi & Sonnenshein, 2000). For example, Bekerman (2007) argues that encounter programs developed between Israelis and Palestinians are based on a naïve acceptance of the "contact hypothesis,"(Amir, 1969) which argues that encounters between opposing sides can come together in trusting environments to overcome prejudices. He argues that most intergroup experiences adopt an essentialist understanding of identity, while simultaneously failing to account for the fact that group identities are formed within larger national and political contexts, namely the nation-state (Bekerman, 2002, 2007). Building off of the successes of encounter programs, while seeking to address such critiques, Bekerman has argued that future peace education initiatives must question the hegemony of nation-state in creating identities.

Recently, researchers and practitioners have looked to technology to do just that. Given the long, highly polarized conflict between Israel and Palestine, which has often left both sides feeling at an impasse, some have argued that virtual peace education is the "only feasible way to practice peace education in an open violent conflict as is the current Israeli/Palestinians one" (Firer, 2008). In a recent article, entitled *Virtual Peace Education*, Roger Firer argues that virtual learning offers a number of benefits as a platform for promoting peace education. Specifically, the major benefits of virtual peace education are that it can be carried out even during times of conflict and can be used to promote a more substantive positive peace by promoting extended contact between different groups. Other research on the influence of educational media has shown positive effects of certain media, such as television, on youth socialization (Sanders et al., 2000; Zimmerman, 1996). Building off of Firer's insights and a belief in the power of educational media and technology to shape youth attitudes and beliefs, we wondered how technology might be used to scale-up peace education initiatives, particularly those that can create space for mutual understanding and re-defining individual and group identities without relying on inherently biased national ideologies.

Global and Mobile Stories: A New Model for Peace Education

One way that we can conceive of peace education is as promoting a universal vision of shared humanity – by promoting a conception of identity that traverses national borders. While national identities are still incredibly powerful identity markers, and by far the most dominant method of organization of individuals throughout the world (Evans, 1997), new media and interactive technology are allowing for increasing levels of cross-border connections. This approach to peace education is in line with Bekerman's recommendations for peace education curricular that do not simply perpetuate national identity hegemonies.

A wide body of literature in institutional theory has shown the rise of a common world culture of humanism, which promotes a belief in individual human rights, the rise of child-centered pedagogies and an expansive view of rights, including cultural, linguistic, peace, environmental rights (Meyer, Boli, Thomas, & Ramirez, 1997; Ramirez, Suarez, & Meyer, 2007; Suarez, 2006). In this body of literature, scholars are increasingly interested in whether individuals are beginning to indentify not only with others within their own national boundaries, but also with a global sense of common humanity. Indeed, this may be the most basic premise of peace education initiatives – a belief in the fundamental worth and dignity of all humanity, regardless of nationality, race, or religion. We wondered how advances in technology could promote the development of this ideal by promoting the development of global identities.

Global Stories and Global Identities

Although researchers have pointed out the possible existence of a world culture at the global level – we wondered how technology might promote this sense of a global identity among individuals. Digital cross-border storytelling and story sharing offered a promising avenue to investigate, as it allows for contact between individuals and the promotion of certain ideals. Prior studies show that storytelling confers a wide range of social and emotional benefits, ranging from developing a sense of self, identity, and wellbeing fostering a moral and ethical value system (Friedberg, 1994; Palmer, Harshbarger, & Koch, 2001; Peck, 1989).

Building off of these findings, researchers have suggested models of digital storytelling for a variety of goals. For example, advocate a digital storytelling model for writing public histories (Klaebe, Foth, Burgess, & Bilandzic, 2009). Additionally, a growing body of research has investigated the power of digital stories and other types of youth-created media as a means to youth empowerment (Barrett, 2006).

Specifically, researchers have investigated how youth-created media can serve as empowering tools for young people to express their personal experiences amidst conflict, to counter dominant media narratives, and offer a vision of peace. Researchers in Israel and Palestine have argued that a peace education model built

on storytelling can help individuals overcome perceived barriers amidst intractable conflict (Bar-On & Kassem, 2004). Similarly, Norman (2009) explains why youth storytelling is a particularly compelling form of peace education, stating, "Youth media provide opportunities for creative expression and civic engagement in spaces in which youth participation is often marginalized" (1). She adds that, "youth media offer alternative information sources to potentially challenge dominant discourses of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict generally and the roles of Palestinian youth specifically" (Norman).

Moreover, digital stories are also a type of creative content, which can bridge both global and local communities. In this way, the digital nature of mobile stories allows students to share their narratives with a larger, global community. The idea of "local–global stories" builds off of the idea of a "glocal" community, which is simultaneously based in local experiences and interactions, but extends to global audiences (Klaebe et al., 2009; Robertson, 1995). Specifically, we see the potential for students' stories to be shared on digital platforms, incorporating them into the larger peace movement. By providing the digital infrastructure to youth affected by violence to discuss the realities of living through war, digital storytelling allows children to not only bear witness to the experience of childhood amidst conflict and develop an awareness of life on the other side of the conflict, but also helps build international awareness of the realities of conflict generally and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict specifically.

Mobile Learning Devices

Despite the many advantages that virtual peace efforts offer over traditional peace educational curricula, access to stable electricity, functioning computers, and the Internet, are certainly not ubiquitous in many parts of the developing world. In fact, the most isolated and impoverished communities, including those in areas ravished by war, do not have steady access to the Internet, electricity, or even schools. Consequently, the benefits of Internet-based virtual peace education programs cannot reach these populations. Mobile technologies, on the other hand, are more economical, portable, and flexible than traditional computers.

Many researchers have pointed out the distinct benefits that mobile devices offer as educational tools (Cabrero, 2002; Chinnery, 2006; Joseph, Binsted, & Suthers, 2005; Kadyte, 2004; Kiernan & Aizawa, 2004; Levy & Kennedy, 2005; Norbrook, English, & Scott, 2003; Ogata & Yano, 2004; Paredes et al., 2005; Thornton & Houser, 2005). Today's mobile devices can store and deliver a vast amount of information, including a wide variety of curricula materials targeted to appropriate ages. The rapid innovations and advances in information and communication technology (ICT), specifically, increases in processing power, memory, and connectivity for mobile, handheld devices have made mobile devices more interactive and media-rich than ever before (Pea and Maldonado 2006), offering a fun and engaging context in which to promote peace education.



Fig. 1 Mobile storytelling application

Moreover, unlike desktop computers, mobile devices require substantially less infrastructure and electricity, which gives them many advantages over traditional computers. Most importantly, mobile devices are capable of reaching even the most isolated audiences (Attewell, 2005; Kim, 2009), and research has shown mobile learning devices have the potential to widen access and supplement education in remote and underserved areas of the world (Zurita & Nussbaum, 2004). Many have noted that this makes them more apt tools for large-scale impact (Kim, Miranda, & Olaciregui, 2008). For these reasons, mobile devices offer an important alternative to computer-based virtual peace education initiatives, particularly for youth in Palestine, given the lack of fully resourced schools in many parts of the West Bank and Gaza (UNICEF, 2008).

Other research suggests that prepackaged content on a light and inexpensive mobile device is a better option than downloadable computer-based modules (Kim, 2009). Consequently, part of our future strategizing process will be to consider how to develop mobile technology applications relevant to peace education and human rights education, and specifically examining how the storytelling process can be integrated into units prepared by the UN Human Rights Education curriculum currently being implemented in refugee schools.[1]

A Model for Global-Mobile Stories

This study aimed to understand how mobile technology could be utilized to promote peace in resource-deprived areas of the world. To investigate this question, researchers at Stanford initiated a cross-border storytelling project in Israel and Palestine. This project utilized the *TeacherMate Handheld Computer System (TeacherMate)* mobile learning devices (see Fig. 1). These devices were developed by the nonprofit Innovations for Learning (IFL), a US-based NGO that focuses on developing

[1] See UNICEF Human Rights Curriculum: http://www.unrwa.org/etemplate.php?id=92.

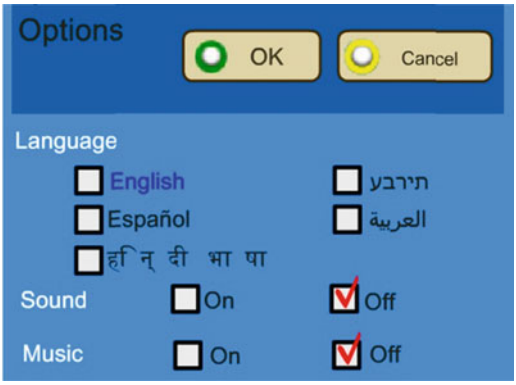


Fig. 2 Optional language settings

innovative technology to improve early elementary education for students and teachers in particularly difficult learning environments.

TeacherMate is a relatively affordable means to provide computer-assisted instruction for all students in the classroom. This mobile device consists of a color screen (11 cm by 7.5 cm), four direction arrow buttons, three control buttons, one execution button, a built-in microphone, an integrated speaker, and a headphone output jack. A headphone set is included for individual use.

The devices use a Linux operating system, and programs can be developed in open-source Flash (GNASH), allowing open-access and easy development for further interactive learning contents with little knowledge of Flash programming. The manufacturing cost of a single device is $50 USD.

Each mobile device can be loaded with a number of mobile e-books aligned with age-appropriate curriculum, e-books, storytelling software, and activities to assess student performance. For example, the e-book software includes a text-to-audio feature, allowing for students to interact with the devices, by looking at the images associated with the stories, hearing corresponding narrations, and reading the text of the stories by following each word as it was highlighted and narrated with either a male or female voice.

Stanford University School of Education (SUSE) has also developed a storytelling program that allows students to record their own narration through the built-in microphone. Images can be uploaded so that students can personalize their stories with cartoon images or pictures from their daily life.

The TeacherMate is now in use in nearly 300 schools throughout the United States. Currently, the creators of the TeacherMate have begun collaborating with Stanford University's School of Education to bring TeacherMates to disadvantaged communities around the globe. Pilot programs already have commenced in Costa Rica, El Salvador, Mexico, the Philippines, Rwanda, and Uganda (Fig. 2).

Figure 3, below, shows a story from Uganda translated, packaged, and made available on iPhone App store to raise funds to provide educational resources to underserved communities while helping a child from a hard-to-reach village reach the global content economy.



Fig. 3 Mobile story from Uganda as an iPhone App

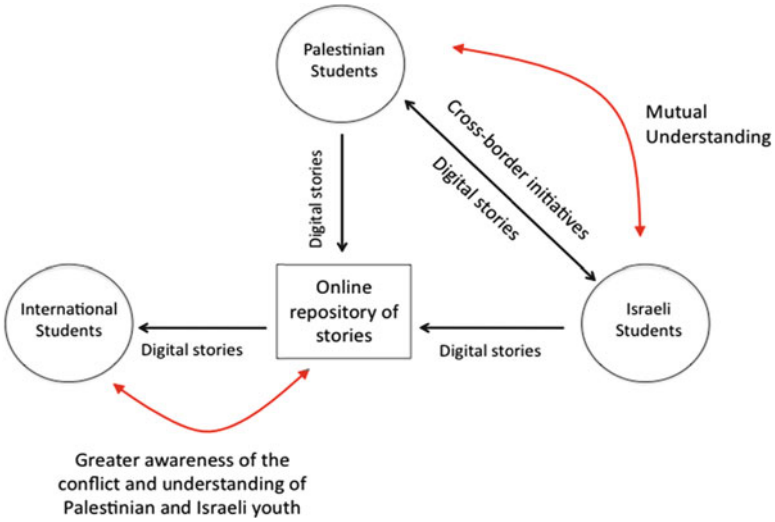


Fig. 4 Model for global-mobile stories to promote mutual understanding

Figure 4 depicts the proposed model for how mobile technology can link Israeli and Palestinian students through digital stories to promote mutual understanding, while also creating a repository of stories for students around the world to learn about Palestinian and Israeli lives, and gain a better understanding of the conflict.

Project Implementation

In 2010, a team of researchers, programmers, students, and professors at Stanford University began translating stories into Arabic and Hebrew, and developing content in both languages. At this point, approximately 14 stories (second-grade reading level)



Fig. 5 Palestinian students playing with the mobile devices

have been collected from students in the United States and Uganda and translated into Hebrew and Arabic.

In March 2010, a delegation of two researchers from SUSE visited Palestinian schools and after-school centers and implemented workshops using mobile devices with approximately 185 Palestinian youth. In these workshops, we used inquiry-based learning methods to promote curiosity and peak interest, by simply entering classrooms and asking students to be the "scientists," by discovering how to turn on the devices and play games. This method of teaching is uncommon in Palestine, but represents an important way of encouraging students to learn without teachers to mediate their understanding, which we believe constitutes a crucial element of story-based peace education. The devices were well-received by primary-age students, and we found that students were able to quickly manipulate the devices and play critical-thinking activities, regardless of their prior level of exposure to technology (Fig. 5).

During our trip, we visited seven different groups of students and carried out workshops with approximately 185 students in total, ranging in age from 8 to 15. Our sample was not designed to be representative, but rather constituted the preliminary step of an action-research design targeted to serve disadvantaged populations (see Kim, 2009). With this aim, we sought out a wide variety of situations in which to collect stories from children. In total, we visited seven institutions, including: public and private schools, after-school programs run by the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), private English language centers, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Students came from a variety of backgrounds, including those studying in prestigious bilingual private schools in Ramallah, as well as students in rural villages and those cut off from the rest of Palestine by the separation wall between Israel and Palestine. For students in these isolated schools, children did not have access to home computers, and electricity was often restricted to 2 h a day. Given the wide diversity of students and schools we visited, we are confident that we captured the experiences and stories from a wide range of Palestinian students.



Fig. 6 A Palestinian boy listens to his recorded story

We asked students to both narrate stories to be collected orally on the mobile devices, while also collecting written stories from students' lives. Many students used the storytelling application to record stories from their imagination, or reflect on stories shared by students in other countries. Others chose to write stories from their imaginations or daily lives. Findings from the data-collection process and initial implementation process are reported below (Fig. 6).

Findings and Future Possibilities

One of the most striking observations from our trip was the constant presence of political tension – the conflict was ubiquitous, and we witnessed it through our own experiences crossing through checkpoints, as well as through students' stories of violence, the graffiti on the walls which stated "Stop Killing Children," or just the sight of soldiers and guns everywhere. The effects of the conflict were palpable and we left Palestine still concerned over both Israeli and Palestinian children's mental and physical health. For example, Fig. 7 below comes from an NGO organization in Nablus, and depicts students' drawings of local buildings, one of which is depicted with a rocket hitting it. The pervasive images of Palestinian victims, depicted as martyrs carrying machineguns, were similarly disturbing. These visible signs of conflict only reinforced our commitment to action-research that twin mobile technologies and innovative peace education initiatives.

A number of noteworthy findings emerged from our data collection and analysis of student stories. First, we found that students living in conflict regions have personal stories to share with the world, many of which draw on their own experiences growing up in conflict, while also recalling common themes of friendship, justice, and hope. We believe these themes must be at the core of any peace education curriculum based on storytelling. However, students' stories also included frequent references to violence, killing, and injustice, suggesting that many have already



Fig. 7 Children's drawing of a house with a rocket

experienced the negative effects of conflict firsthand. For example, students' stories included narratives of having been confronted by Israeli soldiers or settlers, difficulties crossing the border, or experiencing the death of a family member. These were particularly striking, as students were not asked directly to discuss their experiences with the conflict or to mention any difficult experiences they have had; to the contrary, they were simply asked to share a story with children from other countries.

Second, we found that even at relatively young ages, students have developed distinct identities and have developed an affiliation with their respective national group, forged from both personal experiences and political rhetoric. This finding aligns with Bekerman's claim that future peace efforts must promote a type of transnational, counter-hegemonic, or an individual-humanistic conception of identity, as national identities tend to be conflated with national ideologies about the conflict. In practical terms, this suggests the importance to reach children at younger ages to promote a sense of commonality outside national identities.

Third, we found that in many of our sites, particularly those with few resources, or those serving disadvantaged populations, we found that the major barrier to both storytelling, and peace education initiatives generally, appears to be low levels of academic proficiency. Specifically, we found that many students suffered from low levels of literacy and could not express themselves in written form. Many others had difficulty reading basic stories, even into fourth and fifth grade. Our site visits suggest that literacy still remains a significant barrier to students' ability to read, write, and share their stories with the world.

However, when students were asked to narrate their stories, rather than write, they eagerly raised their hands and formed a line to tell their stories, which we were captured as short videos using mobile devices. One young Palestinian boy, who could not write his story, eagerly narrated a story from his life about playing soccer with friends when he was approached by Israeli settlers and had to run and hide behind a rock. As is clear from this student's story, the negative effects of political conflict constantly surround children and make it difficult for them to imagine a peaceful solution to the conflict. Yet at the same time, if they cannot read, they

certainly cannot learn about life on both sides of conflict, or learn about the complex political economy that makes a peaceful solution so difficult. Indeed, a literacy barrier will necessarily prevent youth from engaging in any type of peace education. It is in this context that we think multimedia technology offers distinct advantages, which could allow young people to connect through audio–video media, before or while they are developing their literacy skills. Given the rapid rise of mobile devices able to capture movies or pictures and recordings, we believe that mobile technologies or smartphones could be the next wave of innovative peace education, which could reach even pre-literate children. Reaching pre-literate children may be necessary, if by the time children can already read and write well, they have already adopted a highly nationalist account of the conflict.

Conclusions

Digital storytelling offers an innovative method for young people to share their narratives about peace and conflict with others, while also reading and learning from others' experiences in conflict. Through a lived-experience approach to narrative storytelling, we believe children can begin to develop cross-border awareness and a sense of commonality through universal themes of hope and compassion. Through an initial action-research project of a storytelling model for mobile learning devices, we believe that multimedia stories have the distinct advantage of making students' narratives come alive, while also overcoming the traditional barrier of literacy.

However, our initial study revealed that while mobile technology offers many possibilities, a number of challenges remain. It remains quite difficult to keep the mobile learning devices affordable, while also making them durable and functional, particularly if we want to include advanced features such as cameras and voice recorders. In addition, more studies are needed to maximize the usability of mobile learning devices for children of all ages while also ensuring the sustainability of the education model (e.g., structure, funding, resources, etc.). These obstacles, however, if overcome, could prepare many young children, whose access to technology is currently limited, to leverage digital tools of the twenty-first century to confront the many obstacles they will face in their futures, a peaceful solution to political conflict being only one such problem.

At the same time, we must not forget that the devices themselves are simply vehicles for content and pedagogy. They must be filled with meaningful content and integrated in proven pedagogy, which promotes the higher values of shared peace and prosperity. Any content that is not integrated in pedagogy does not support our larger mission of educating and nurturing our children, and perhaps more importantly, any pedagogies purposefully nullifying or disrupting shared peace and prosperity must be identified and stopped.

Lastly, this study argues that mobile applications can be incorporated into educational initiatives in myriad ways, many of which are yet unexplored. At the present time, we are investigating opportunities for incorporating health education and

financial literacy programs into mobile devices and applications. The opportunities are limitless, but they require us to go beyond the traditional boundaries of the classroom to examine the role technology and media can play when placed at the intersection of society and schooling.

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