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Cross-Cultural Internet Based Resource for Teaching Democracy *

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Cross-Cultural Internet Based Resource for Teaching Democracy

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Abstract

The Spirit of Democracy Project was initiated in 2000 by the Citizenship Education Group at UNB, Canada, in partnership with the Russian Association for Civic Education. The goal of this project is to help Russian educators to develop a new dynamic approach to citizenship education in public schools. The focus of the Project is the development of online curriculum resources for use by teachers in Russia and Canada. The Canadian and Russian project teams are developing materials for similar topics based on local content. Researchers create learning opportunities using situations and springboards. The situations present democratic issues and concepts, for example the value of loyalty, or the meaning of privacy. An important role in the Project is assigned to visual materials and creative use of hypermedia. The project site brought together a community of practice in cyberspace – a community of social studies researchers and teachers from Russia and Canada.

Introduction

The Spirit of Democracy Project began in the summer of 2000. The project was initiated by the University of New Brunswick, Canada, Faculty of Education, Citizenship Education Research and Development Group, in partnership with the Russian Association for Civic Education and Uchitelskaya Gazeta, and was made possible through financial contribution from the Canadian International Development Agency.

The goal of the project is to help Russian educators to develop a new dynamic approach to citizenship education in public schools. The main focus of the Project is on the development of online citizenship education resources for use by teachers in Russia and Canada. The approaches used to convey “the spirit of democracy” include blended learning, situated learning, and creative use of Web media to effectively teach democracy. A lot of effort has been put into making the Project site a truly democratic learning environment, including links to national and international democratic sources.

After two years we can already call this project a success – the Russian team, participating in the project, have developed and posted on the Project Web site more than 50 different topics related to citizenship and democracy, and the Canadian team posted 27 such topics [1]. Researchers and schoolteachers develop these topics collaboratively. Project materials posted on the Web have already been successfully used by Canadian and Russian teachers in a classroom environment and received positive responses.

Project description

Learning approach used

The Spirit of Democracy project is using the Web to deliver online resources: content, instructions, along with a discussion environment for teachers and students. These curriculum resources can be used as a complete set of materials or as individual lesson topics for different subjects such as Social Studies, History, Citizenship Education, etc. The Canadian and Russian project teams are developing project materials for similar topics based on local content. As a result, the information presented on the Canadian site is relevant to the lives of young Canadians, and the content on the Russian site may differ and is relevant to the lives of Russian students.

Combined with the creative use of multimedia and hypermedia Web based learning offers unique opportunities for educators. The Spirit of Democracy Project’s learning approach is based on the ideas of Lev Semenovitch Vygotsky who is widely known as “The Mozart of Psychology”. Vygotsky, along with Piaget and Bruner developed the foundation for the concepts of Situated Learning and Anchored Instruction [2].

The Situated Learning approach is based on Situated Cognition Theory that suggests that learning is tied to authentic activity, context and culture [3]. As mentioned by Hughes [4]: “An authentic context for citizenship learning must be a situation in which ‘real’ citizens might be required to think and to act. It can be current,

historical, or both; it can be near or far in both time and place". The Spirit of Democracy Project provides teachers and students with a wide range of such "real life" situations. The Project is using a "blended learning" approach in which teachers use online materials in combination with conventional classroom training.

Web media by its nature is the most democratic type of media and is ideally suited for conveying the "spirit of democracy" idea. In this paper authors are using the Web media definition from Huss [5], where the Web media is defined as the use of the text, images, animations, sounds and video on the Web, supported by Hypertext Markup Language (HTML).

Web-based studies allow students to access all original materials, even those provided for teachers. The Web also serves as a unique source of "live" information. By providing hypertext links to government organizations, international organizations, educational Web sites, and online magazines, The Spirit of Democracy learning materials are always up-to date and offer information on recent important developments in the area of Citizenship and Social Studies in Canada, Russia and all over the world.

Creative use of Web media

Within The Spirit of Democracy Project, developers, on both sides, create learning opportunities using situations and springboards (anchors). The situations present democratic issues and concepts, for example the value of loyalty, or the meaning of privacy. The uniqueness of the approach taken by the Spirit of

Democracy project is that researchers use authentic materials to involve students in learning and discovery. A very important role is assigned to visual materials. The situation is usually presented to students by showing a sequence of 8-10 pictures. The pictures should be descriptive enough to tell the story and appealing enough to draw the students in to a discussion about a particular topic. To achieve these results, the project illustrator has to work closely with researchers to portray the situations they want to use.

The topic of "Privacy" is a good example of such joint work between a researcher and an illustrator. One of the scenarios dealing with the topic of "Legal Aspects of Privacy" involves a discussion on the case of unreasonable search and seizure (Mr. Bagnell's case). In the learning activity "You Be the Judge" students need to learn all the details of the case and make a legal judgment [6]. The factual materials of the case are presented as a series of illustrations that lead students through the sequence of events of the actual case (Figure 1). One of the important conditions of this activity is to create an illusion of the court environment and help students experience the process of rendering a fair judgment. The use of visuals here is much more appropriate than the use of newspaper or magazine articles. Such articles usually contain judgmental opinions that may influence students' decisions one way or another. The researcher needed to spend a considerable amount of time working with the illustrator on the details of each scene, making sure that it properly presents all the facts of the case without any additional visual information that might influence students' opinion.

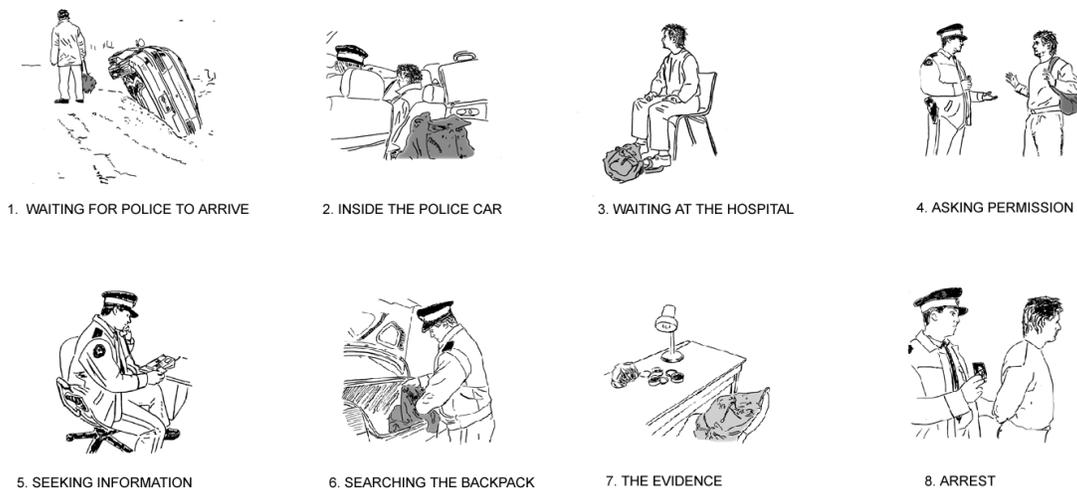


Figure 1. Mr. Bagnell's case

Along with the visual story presented through illustrations, the hypertext links allow students to learn the facts of the case and get additional supportive information, such as, excerpts from the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the Controlled drugs and Substances Act, excerpts from precedents that deal with search and seizure cases and from the Privacy Act of New Brunswick, and a discussion of reasonable grounds. It is interesting to mention that our Russian colleagues are having a difficult time translating the word “privacy” as there is no equivalent in the Russian language. Currently in Russia people are using the English word “privacy” to convey the correct meaning of the concept. The idea of having a Privacy Commissioner is also something unheard of in Russian society.

One more example of using images, creatively, to engage students in discussion about democratic issues, like “Freedom of religion”, is an interactive presentation of the famous Russian painting “Boyarynya Morozova” by Surikov [7]. In this painting the artist depicts Feodosiya Morozova, who was an active supporter of the old-believer movement in the Russian church, and a crowd made up of vivid individuals. The image map of the painting is hyperlinked to the close-ups of the individual characters portrayed by the painter. During the class discussion the teacher can, using this interactive image, focus student’s attention on different human faces in this complex masterpiece portraying a whole range of attitudes towards religion. This helps to initiate a class discussion about a real historical event and how different people with their own beliefs and values view this event.

Unfortunately, the use of multimedia in this international project is heavily restricted by bandwidth limitations on the Russian partners’ side. Russian schools, especially in rural areas, have very slow Internet

connections. Due to these bandwidth limitations, in some cases video clips on springboards had to be substituted by a sequence of compressed images and songs were replaced by text.

Cultural issues

Because of the international nature of The Spirit of Democracy Project, it presented an opportunity for both teams to develop inter-cultural awareness and understanding. Most of the cultural issues were related to the Web site design and project logo. The process of logo design is an illustration of the complex issues that can arise between two teams working together in different countries with different histories and cultures.

At the beginning of the project it was decided that both teams, Russian and Canadian, would develop their own content. In the first three months of the project a question was raised about designing a logo. The process of logo design is a good illustration of the complex relationship between the two teams. The Project asked a Canadian graphic artist to design a logo for the Spirit of Democracy project. The artist created the first logo based on the existing Russian interpretation of democratic symbols (Figure 2, a). This logo was discussed during the meetings of the Canadian team and was rejected as being not a “true North American democratic symbol” and also having nothing to do with Russia. A second attempt produced a logo that used an image of the Russian “White House” (former Russian Parliament building) as a symbol of democracy (Figure 2,b). This logo was accepted by Canadian team, but strongly rejected by Russian team members. Russians argued that government buildings in Russian culture are not associated with symbols of democracy. Finally, the artist created the third version of

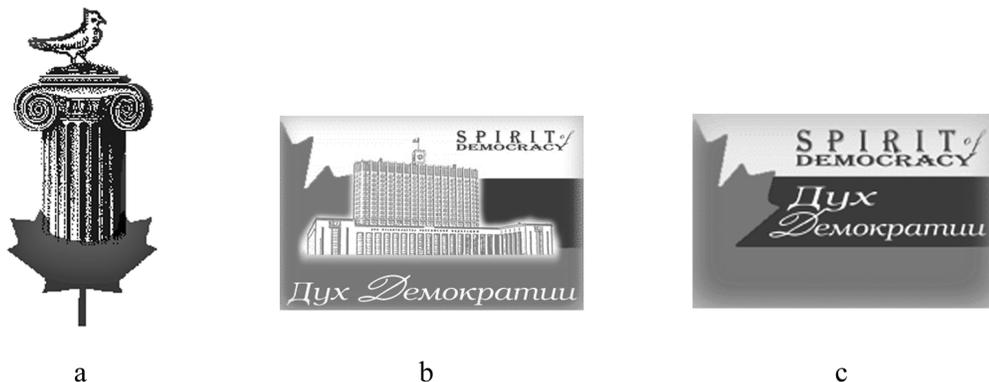


Figure 2. The project logo

the Project logo by removing all imagery and blending two national flags in one image with typography as a main graphic element (Figure 2, c). Both teams accepted this logo as a working draft.

Interface design and translation tools

It is important to mention a creative approach in interface design utilized by The Spirit of Democracy Project. The majority of graphic navigation elements are intentionally designed as hypertext links and not as images. This approach allows the use of automatic translation tools to translate not only the content of individual web pages, but also the navigational elements, thus allowing international users access to the entire content of the Canadian Web site. In the future, with the development of the automatic translation technology, the content of the entire Project site, including Russian web pages, will be available for international users. However, even today, using the Web based automatic translation engine, we provide an option to translate Canadian pages into four languages such as French, Spanish, German and Italian.

The quality of the automatic translation is reasonable, for example the French translation was evaluated and found to be of acceptable quality. However, this is not the case with all languages. For example, when using the service in Spanish, the word "Spirit" in the phrase "Spirit of Democracy" gets translated to the word "alcohol". We believe that, in the future, with the development of better translation tools, these problems will be solved.

It is worthwhile to mention collaborative idea, used in the design of a site map, for the Project Web site. In fact, there are two different site maps, for Russian and Canadian sections. Each navigational map provides hyperlinks not only to local pages, but also allows users to navigate the counterpart site, e.g. Canadian site map provides links not only to Canadian pages, but also helps Canadian users navigate the Russian content, and vice versa. This setup allows users with limited knowledge of a foreign language to explore content on the "foreign" Web site.

Project and the community of practice

The project site brought together a community of practice in cyberspace – a community of social studies researchers and teachers from Russia and Canada. We found that sharing experiences is a valuable part of the virtual community. The virtual community can form within a single school district, province, country and, in our case, between two countries, thus fading the boundaries between counties and continents. International virtual communities can provide teachers, and, in turn, students with the opportunities to develop relationships with people from diverse cultures and backgrounds and

provide an environment that will transform participants into more tolerant and respectful citizens [8].

The concept of community of practice is well known in education and also widely used in knowledge management literature. As broadly defined by Wender and Snyder [9], community of practice is "a group of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise". As emphasized by Duek [10], another essential part of the community of practice is a social dimension: "Emphasis is on sharing of knowledge between people, building communities of knowledge workers, sharing personal experiences, building effective and socially satisfying network of people..."

The educators engaged in the network-based learning can benefit from the experience of the business world where support of information technologies is combined with the knowledge and understanding of knowledge management methods, and the organization of communities of practice engaged in collaborative learning [11]. In order for a community of practice to continue to exist and develop, it needs to be supported by a comprehensive knowledge management framework. This framework shall include several essential components such as supportive environmental factors, effective management system and some incentives for sharing [12]. Thus, in order for the existing Spirit of Democracy's virtual community to continue to exist and function successfully, we believe it would be necessary to create a supporting management framework for the project.

One of the models of the supportive framework for the virtual community of practice that is well developed is the Web portal model [13]. We believe that a logical extension of the Spirit of Democracy Project into the second phase would be to create a "Spirit of Democracy" portal that will accommodate resources to support the work of the Spirit of Democracy's community members and also will create an online collaborative work and learning environment.

A possible model for this type of collaborative work environment would be a model where the Project Portal provides free access to the repository of resource materials, search and retrieval tools, and a discussion forum for scholars, teachers and students. The participating universities and organizations, schools, and teachers submit raw materials (ideas, papers, pictures, lesson plans, springboards, etc.) in to the repository where they are classified according to topics. A peer review process of submissions, by content experts from the social sciences and education community, is undertaken to assure the quality of submissions. This proposed Project Portal will provide an environment of a "live" and dynamic forum, where educators exchange information, get peer reviews and comments on their work, and get valuable feedback from other educators and from students.

A good example of a successful e-Democracy forum is Politalk [14] – a forum that facilitates democratic deliberation. On this forum citizens debate important democratic issues such as campaign finance reform, globalization, transportation, etc. So far the forum was very successful in presenting a diverse set of opinions. According to Bearse [15] it also “...managed to avoid the ‘flaming’, ideological fixations and personality colorings that have afflicted other e-mail interchanges” due to the following main features:

1. Recruitment of a cross-section of resource people that post background information, including government officials and experts. They also participate in discussions;
2. Having a good forum moderator who sets rules, monitor debates and archives the proceedings.

To assure successful functioning of the proposed Spirit of Democracy Portal we believe it would be crucial to use similar strategies for building the Project’s support team.

Conclusions

The organizing idea for this project was born several years ago when two Canadian researchers, Andrew Hughes and Alan Sears witnessed a compelling appeal from colleagues from Argentina at a civic education conference. Argentinean educators, working to foster an emerging democratic culture in their country said “Don’t teach us about the structures of democracy - we know all about the structures of democracy; teach us the spirit of democracy” [16].

In the summer of 2000 Russian and Canadian teams for the Spirit of Democracy project met for the first time in Canada to discuss how they are going to teach “the spirit of democracy”. Today, after two years of successful collaboration, numerous project materials posted on the Web have already been successfully tried by Canadian and Russian teachers in a classroom environment and received positive responses. Today many participating Canadian and Russian schools are Spirit of Democracy online resources to conduct classes and educate youngsters on democratic values and the spirit of democracy.

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