

**Lessons from Israeli Jewish-Arab Collaborative Learning of Their Shared History**  
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**Abstract**

We engaged Israeli students, Jewish and Arab, in a collaborative investigation of their shared past. We traced the learning that occurred by examining students' interactions and their individual essays and multi-ethnic group essays. Utilizing the theoretical framework of dialogical learning, we found that most students had learned as they struggled to orchestrate their conflicting and morally loaded voices into one group essay: (a) they enriched their voices, by means of the other's viewpoint, with new understandings about the past and the nature of history; (b) their dialogical capacity—the ability to converse open-mindedly with people who have different or even contradictory viewpoints—evolved. Specifically, they became aware of their responsibility for maintaining a dialogue and the moral aspect of their discursive actions.

## Introduction

In this paper I will present the "Doing History Together" research project. In this project Jewish and Arab students collaboratively investigate a historical event of their shared past, specifically an event that concerns the history of the Arab-Jewish conflict in the period that began at the end of World War I and the British Mandate Palestine (1917-1948). Analyzing the products and the interactions enable me to understand the dynamics of the collaboration among the participants, especially how -- given the emotional and moral load and the controversy inherent in the activity— they strive to maintain the collaboration going and the changes, if at all, in the participants' perceptions regarding the historical events and toward collaborative activity with the other.

The significance of this work is in its contribution to understanding what promotes a dialogue between Arab and Jewish students, an important goal, maybe today more than ever. According to a report of a public committee that was appointed by the Israel's Minister of Education to pursue ways to educate Israelis, both Jews and Arabs, to shared life, published on January 2009 (in Hebrew), there are many indications that there is a growth in levels of alienation and animosity between the Jewish and Arab populations. This tension between these two societies also permeates to the younger generation, and most of the Israeli youth have negative perception and stereotypes toward the Arabs (Kupermintz et. al., 2007).

Among the various reasons for the growing alienation, the committee referred to the intractable conflict that last more than one hundred years. While the historical event that led to the establishment of Israel, symbolizes to most Jews (the majority in Israel) a national recovery, it perceives by the Arab minority, who was the majority in Palestine during the British Mandate, as a national disaster. Indeed a study conducted among Jews and Arabs youth reveals that there is reciprocal delegitimization of the other historical narratives. Both sides invalidate the other descriptions and interpretation of the historical events that concern the Arab-Jews conflict<sup>1</sup>.

According to Salomon(2004), this reciprocal delegitimization plays a crucial role in intensifying the conflict because the group's collective narrative-- their underlying belief systems and their roots in historical memories—"bolsters the group's self-identity and justifies its role in the conflict, it, also, invalidates the other side's collective narrative and its role in the conflict: "If "we" are right, "they" are surely wrong, and if "we" are victims, "they" are obviously the perpetrators" (Salomon, 2004:276-277).

Thus, education system which strives to shared life among Jews and Arabs, has to encourage students to develop a "dialogical capacity", defined by Watkins as follows: "the allowing of the other and the self to freely arise and to be given a chance for expression, to allow the other to exist autonomously from myself ... to move toward difference not with denial or rejection but with tolerance, curiosity." (Watkins, 2003:7).

History can serve as a convenient venue for fostering students' development of dialogical capacity due to its multi-perceptiveness' and interpretive nature. Moreover, historical thinking, especially the ability to see through the eyes of the people we are study, means the ability to dialogue with a different other who lived in the past (Seixas 1993, Wineburg 2001). In the long term, teaching students historical thinking in the context of their studies about their past of conflict, might foster their ability to be in a dialogue with conflicting voices and can enhance tolerance and empathy regarding the narrative of the "other", even though they still might disagree with it.

Indeed, in the recent years we witnessed a shift toward teaching history as part of process of reconciliation in societies with violent past (Cole, 2007). Following this line of thought, we suggest a collaborative learning model that brings together Jewish and Arabs students. We believe that working together on analytical assignment, investigating historical events concerning to the conflict, will bring closer the two sides. Specifically, this collaborative learning model has the potential to awake the students' consciousness to the fact that their interaction with their common past, as well as that of the historical text they are reading, is driven by their sense of belonging and that history is complex and multifaceted.

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<sup>1</sup> Doctorial study conducted by Rabia Hsseisi and Yigal Rosen in Faculty of Education, University of Haifa (in Hebrew)

Obviously, it was crucial to design the encounter so that it would support collaboration, or otherwise students may fail to collaborate because of the emotional load inherent in the encounter. Failure could be manifested as two monologues or as a refusal to continue the conversation with the other. Therefore, our collaborative setting was designed to fulfil the variables, which according to Contact Theory (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998), improves the effectiveness of encounters between conflicting groups. Hence, in our design, we strove to uphold the equality status of the participants in the micro context of the activity (i.e., the group) although the majority-minority power relations at the macro level. For this reason, all the group members held similar roles and responsibilities. Additionally, a balanced representation of the two narratives was essential for the fulfilment of the condition of equality. To this end, the historical texts included a representation of the two narratives and were chosen by consulting with both Jewish and Arab historians. Furthermore the activity takes place in a Wiki web-based environment that provides a means for communication as well as publicly shared spaces for joint writing, i.e., anyone can read, add, change or delete a web page, and the technology keeps a record of previous versions. This environment support egalitarian dialogue, meaning a dialogue in which contributions are considered according to the validity of their reasoning, instead of according to the status or position of power of those who make them.

In order to increase collaboration at the expense of competition, a second variable deemed important according to the contact theory, in the heterogeneous phase we decided to allow the students the freedom of choice to decide whether they agreed to write a joint account of the event, or to submit an analysis together of the differences between their viewpoints. Additionally, we required that the assignment be analytical in order to encourage the establishment of social norms for analytical discussion, rather than emotional monologues. Secondary sources has the potential to be demonstrative of the interpretive nature of history (Lee, 2004) and serve as examples of how historians deal with a topic and construct a thesis from facts and ideas. These texts might also help students depersonalize their moral judgement and emotions. Finally, we encourage educated discussions and the activities carry out in schools as part of the school commitment.

The students investigated two historical events: (a) the issuance of the Balfour Declaration on November 2, 1917, in which the British Government announced that "His Majesty's government view with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people" and (b) the Arab disturbances of August 1929 (also known as riots in Palestinian sources). That event was preceded by ongoing tensions between Arabs and Jews regarding prayer rights at the Western Wall. The assignment consisted of two one-week phases: ethnically homogeneous phase, followed by a bi-ethnic, collaborative phase. In the ethnically homogeneous phase, pairs of Arab students and pairs of Jews students work separately. Each pair read the sources, composed an essay addressing the assignment questions, and uploaded it to a Wiki website. Next, in the collaborative phase, the students formed bi-ethnic foursomes, comprised of two students from each ethnic group. They read all the individual essays and were given two options: either to write a joint essay that answered the assignment questions, or to explain the essence of the disagreement between them that prevented them from writing one answer.

Methodology: The research was carried out in two phases. First, a pilot study was carried out with 24 Arab and Jewish graduate students in the school of education at an Israeli university. This phase enabled us to test the feasibility of the activity and fine-tune its constituting elements. Next, in the main phase of the study, 128 high-school students in 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grades from 3 Arabs and 3 Jewish high schools in Israel participated in the activity. The high-school students communicated only via the internet both asynchronously by commenting and editing WebPages and synchronously, using chats, while the graduate students had also face-to-face meeting.

Our study is based on three sources of data: (1) the essays the students wrote in each phase using the Wiki environment; (2) a questionnaire that was distributed twice, at the beginning and at the end of the activity, in which students were asked to write an individual essay about the event and to reflect on their attitudes regarding the activity; (3) transcripts of discussions among the bi-ethnic groups.

We analyzed transcripts of the discussions at two levels, namely, utterances and episodes (van Boxtel et al. 2000). More specifically, we divided the transcripts into utterances and classified them into categories of task acts using the coding scheme that we developed for analyzing collaborative writing task. We then analyzed the transcripts on an episodic level, in order to identify contingencies reflecting elaboration, i.e. new connections or claims made, and the level of co-construction, i.e. identifying the participants in each episode.

Additionally, we employed a historical content analysis. To this end, we identified the historical agents to which students attributed an active role in the event discussed (Seixas, 1993). For each agent, we identified the role assumed in the historical process, the constraints, the circumstances, the beliefs upon which the agent acted, and the relations between this agent and other agents. Finally, moral judgment was determined based on students' use of expressions indicating a positive or negative opinion of either an historical agent or contemporary interlocutors, whether visible or invisible.

Finally, we employed a thematic analysis of students' individual questionnaires.

### **Summary of results and conclusions**

The pilot study: Four groups (out of a total of six groups) not only managed to finish the assignment, but also decided and managed to produce joint answers. The joint answers of three of these groups were comprised from the answers of the homogenous subgroups written in the first phase of the activity. The fourth group simply put the Jewish answer and right after the Arabs' answer. Two groups (out of six) did not manage to produce a joint answer.

The analysis of the discussion held in the second phase of the activity reveals that both Jewish and Arabs students were active in the discussions about the historical events. However, in agreement with the literature, the Jewish students were more dominant, especially in those actions that concerned to the construction and structure of the joint text (Maoz, 2000). As expected episodes that discussed the relationship between the Arabs and the Jewish historical agents, were mostly charged in terms of the moral judgment employed by participants, both Jews and Arabs, vis-à-vis the historical agents of the "other" side.

Despite the charged atmosphere students were observed to make efforts to keep the conversation going. Specifically, they developed strategies that enabled them to reduce the tension, for example by concentrating on the writing task, by omitting words they felt were "tension increases" without backing off their arguments. Another strategy was to search ways to find themes accepted by both sides. In those groups, where the atmosphere was charged, students developed the ability to listen and respond to arguments they disagree with, hence their dialogical capacity evolved. In more tranquil atmosphere, it appeared that students navigated the discussions to "colder" and less fertile interaction.

We also found changes in the students' perceptions regarding the collaboration with the other side. While at the beginning they tend to portray the other side as fixated, at the end they realized that they also are responsible to keep dialogue going. Some students reported that the discussion with the students from the other side helped them to understand the event differently.

Preliminary results from data of high-school students: Similarly, to the results from the pilot study, most of the high-school students anticipated the discussions to be unpleasant (less than 1% of the Jewish and Arab high school students, respectively, expected the conversation to be pleasant). Yet, at the end of the activity, 23% and 33% of the Jewish and Arab high school students, respectively, had reported that the discussions were pleasant.

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