

A SOCIAL-CONSTRUCTIVE APPROACH OF SOCIAL AND POLITICAL EDUCATION CONCERNING ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP WITH THE DEVELOPMENT OF A HYPERMEDIA SOFTWARE APPLICATION

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Abstract:

This paper presents a hypermedia interactive educational software developed by the authors as well as the constructivist characteristics and prospects of its application in teaching Social and Political Education to students of the sixth grade of primary school. General aims of this software are to promote active learning, to help students develop conscience of active citizenship and produce learning products while trying to elaborate complex, social and political matters that are related to the concept of democracy in the context of an authentic, case-study and problem solving based learning environment.

Keywords: citizenship, social constructivism, problem based learning.

INTRODUCTION

There is a growing concern in the literature of Social and Political Education about the way this subject is being taught in school (Καρακατσάνη, 2003), since it is thought to be of great importance in helping young people to become active and critical citizen in our demanding, complex, globalized, and multicultural world. However, social and political issues are “delicate” matters to deal with at school, particularly in countries, like Greece, that have experienced various traumatic political upheavals and insecurity up to the relatively recent past. This educational field still seems to be rather resistant to change although some effort has been made recently for curriculum educational renovation and improvement with the introduction of new textbooks accompanied with an officially developed multimedia software which, however, seems to lack the standards that constitute a high quality educational software. Apart from a few exceptions (Καρακατσάνη, 2003), social issues are still taught at a reproductive level, students have to study the book in order to learn the right answers to given problems in a rather verbalistic manner, listen to the teachers’ lecture or try to find out some meaningless information from various sources or Internet. Social reality is presented to children in a simplistic, static and fragmented way. A pilot study of exploration of the pupils’ attitudes towards this school subject that has been made in three primary schools of Athens

during the formative evaluation phase of our educational software revealed that a few opportunities are given to pupils for engagement in meaningful activities during this course. However, analysis of the research literature (Chickering and Gamson 1987), suggests that students must do more than just listen: They must read, write, discuss, or be engaged in solving problems as well as in such higher-order thinking tasks as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Building on situated cognition (Carr, Jonassen, Litzinger & Marra, 1998), suggests the creation of fruitful generative learning environments (Cognition & Technology Group at Vanderbilt, 1991; Grabowski, 1996) where reasoning and supported exploration are in focus, especially when using ICT tools (Raptis and Raptis, 2004).

The software under the title “The School and the city that we want to have - Change attitude, take action” that is presented here is an open educational environment aiming at facilitating pupils’ flexible (Spiro et al. 1998) and contextualized, learning about social education issues. It is also aims at helping them to develop action and meaning concerning the concept of pro-active citizenship in various social contexts as well as readiness towards undertaking collaborative social initiatives based on the values of “every day democracy” and humanity enhancement. Pro-activity is defined as the development of qualities and skills that make it possible to take

an invisible idea and make it a reality; pro-activity involves formulating a purpose, planning out that purpose, and then acting on that plan until the purpose is realized (Corbett, 1998a).



Figure 1: software's first screen

A crucial component of this software is the fact that it is based on a problem solving learning approach. “The more the problem-solving learning situation represents the real world, the more likely the student will

transfer skills to other problem solving situations. This can be done by anchoring learning in meaningful contexts which simulate apprenticeship learning” (Savery & Duffy, 1995, p. 41) For the construction of this software we also adopted the Concept-centered Contextualized Learning Model (Ματσαγγούρας, 2003) based on a social-constructivist approach to learning. Students are problematized by being engaged in complex case study situations or in some kind of social action, and deal with fundamental issues concerning democracy and ethics such as: egocentric, inconsiderate, passive, indifferent, destructive and narrow minded social behavior as well as contrasting situations which challenge students to think more critically about important issues of a democratic and ethically advanced citizenship such as: the many aspects of freedom, justice, social responsibility and participation, power distribution, respect, tolerance, solidarity, empathy, public welfare etc. They also have the opportunity to deal with interdisciplinary matters such as dynamic social interdependence and equilibrium, relativity, development and change of social rules and values, as well as rethink critically various kinds of power and social relationships.

Learning aims: The main objectives of this innovative software are, students to: develop critical thought and conscience, develop understanding of some basic concepts concerning proactive citizenship, democracy and humanitarian ethics, that are not sufficiently tackled by the school handbook, in an open, experiential, flexible and integrative learning environment that promotes active and collaborative learning, higher order thinking and whole personality development.

Theoretical foundations and design methodology

In developing this interactive hypermedia educational software a social – constructivist approach of social and political education has been adopted in combination with some emancipatory elements of the critical pedagogy school of thought. Although constructivism and critical theory constitute two different categories of pedagogy, they both nevertheless share most of the principles of the relativistic and postmodern epistemological thought of nowadays. Their difference is that of emphasis rather than that of a kind. The former emphasises the phenomenological as well as the social nature of the process of learning construction whilst the latter stresses out the social-political nature of this process as well as the social role of educational partners and institutions. However, educators with strong social interests could use them both in building up their own personal theory in order to develop and study pedagogically designed learning environments aiming at facilitating both students’ cognitive development and social change in the school culture. (Ράπτης, Ράπτη, 2004). An attempt has also been made to take into consideration most of the constructivist principles that have been pointed out in the relative literature (See, for example, Jonassen 1994, Wilson, 1996, Honebein, 1996, Saver and Duffy, 1996). Some of have been summarized by Jonassen (1994, p.35): “A constructivist software design provides multiple representations of reality, represents the natural complexity of the real world, focus on knowledge construction, not reproduction, presents authentic tasks, provides real-world, case-based learning environments, rather than pre-determined instructional sequences; fosters reflective practice, enables context-and content dependent knowledge construction and supports collaborative construction of knowledge through social negotiation”.

Presentation of the product

The software we have created is based on a problematic situation which provides students with opportunities for decision-making (fig.2) which is an ideal process for the students’ development of personal and social skills such as goal setting, problem solving and decision making that are very much valued nowadays (Powers, et al., 1996; Wehmeyer et al, 1998).



Figure 2: decision – making

The students participate in solving the problem and help the characters of the story, who often hold opposing views and differ in their behavior, work together to arrive to some solutions. Students are often given the opportunity of role-playing as well as entering more deeply into the natures and motives of the literary characters they are studying, be engaged in

imaginary interactions, experience dilemmas and cognitive conflict. This method can be especially useful when examining qualities related to resolving conflict and elaborating alternative solutions (Spiro et al, 1998). “Role playing a character’s conflict and resolution can be effective ‘practice’ for times when students actually become involved in personal conflict” (Otten, 2002, p. 82). A summary of the main story’s starting point (fig.3) of the software is: once upon a time there was a school with a 6th grade class of students. Next to the school lived an old man, Mr Elias, who gave his permission to school to use a small part of his land as back-yard.



Figures 3: The story

There was a huge, old olive tree, the only one left in the neighborhood from the past, in this back-yard. The children loved Mr Elias and his tree. When he retired, he sold his house and his garden to Mr and Mrs Mean. The new owners claimed the part of the land back, in a juridical conflict and wanted to have the tree cut. The students wanted their land back and save the precious tree. The students go to the main page (fig.4) in order to get involved in an interactive story with many alternative solutions and complex consequences leading to planning many forms of imaginative activities and strategies such as various types of argumentative or creative writing, studying, interviewing, debating and negotiating etc.



Figure 4: software’s main page

Some indicative activities: There are many thematic units and activities around our main theme, such as the following activities concerning “Ecology” :

Summary of the 1st activity: “Before and after”... (fig.5) Students have a walk in their neighborhoods, record what they see, hear and feel, locate problematic situations, take pictures, make notes and electronic reports referring to issues of causes, responsibilities as well as social, ecological and aesthetic ideas. Then they attempt some virtual or actual modeling interventions to transform their city.



Figures 5: A walk in the neighborhood – Changing our school image

Summary of the 2nd activity: The tale of two towns (fig.6). Students examine the case - study of two cities and comment on the way citizens confront problems having to do with social welfare, economy, culture and ecology. Students, also, compare the two cities, interpret the reasons of progress or stagnation of the two cities and communicate via e-mail with cooperating experts in order to ask their opinion on issues about the two cities and formulate their own propositions.



Figures 6: The tale about two towns

Summary of the 3rd activity: Original ways of action based on their own or virtual review material. Students seek for ways of making their own green revolution, using some multimedia material provided by the program or Internet.

Summary of the 4th activity: Time Trip: Traveling in the past and recording ecological, aesthetic and socio-economic differences in the natural and urban environment.

Summary of the 5th activity: "Green journalists". Students impersonate the journalists and undertake the mission to investigate ecological problems of their neighborhood and participate in the creation of a video clip in order to start a campaign addressed to local residents.

Concluding note: The above presentation of this particular software, which has been developed for research purposes) aims at sharing our designing ideas with educators wishing to adopt a creative approach to teaching with the use of ICT.

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