

Technology

BY BRADLEY SOLMSEN

In ways previously impossible, twenty-first century technologies (e.g., virtual worlds and social networking) provide effective methods and incentives to more deeply engage and connect with Israel in a manner that is meaningful, sophisticated, and encouraging.

WHAT CONTRIBUTION can technology make to the field of Israel engagement? Technology, in relation to Israel engagement, holds the promise of bringing Israel to the learner in ways that we have not seen possible in the past. The two projects that were part of the Project InCiTE (<http://www.projectincite.blogspot.com>) technology cluster included a project to introduce high school students to Israel through journeys and manipulation in the virtual world software platform (referred to here as Pitriworld, <http://pitriworld.com>) and a project to provide educational and social follow-up experiences for high school students after a trip to Israel (referred to as Follow-Up).

The Pitriworld project has the potential to answer the question: How do we introduce Israel to students in a meaningful, sophisticated way that encourages them to build a connection and want to deepen that connection? In this case technology plays two roles. Initially it provides the way to “get to” Israel. Students are transported virtually to a wide variety of places in Israel and presented with scenarios and activities that are context specific. Secondly, technology, in this case, is used as a motivational force. Many students sign up for this course because of the promise of a virtual world experience not because of the chance to “visit” Israel. If the course is well constructed the result will include opportunities to become better acquainted with the software and (probably less anticipated or expected) a better connection to elements of the land of Israel.

The Follow-Up project aims to use technology to both continue to foster social bonds as well as deepen the learning and educational agenda. We know that when students travel to Israel in organized groups they tend to form strong social connections. The Follow-Up project promises alumni of these Israel trips the opportunity to continue these social connections. With this project the technology provides the incentive (staying in touch or reconnecting). While students are enjoying one another’s company—well-crafted, engaging, familiar educational content is inserted into the context.

What Are the Three Things That I Learned in Working With These Two Fellows?

1. In both cases the components identified as incentives turned out to be effective as incentives. In the case of Virtual World, students were attracted to the courses because of the opportunity to “play” in Pitriworld. In the case of the Follow-Up project, we know from focus groups as well as other related work that students seek one another out to continue to socialize after the conclusion of an Israel trip.

2. The content side of technological forms of engagement is more elusive. The goal for both of these projects is to make sure the level of actual learning or engagement is not overshadowed by the technology itself. Learning and engagement in these settings is challenging and difficult to measure.

3. The Pitriworld project presented a hybrid model. In this project the students were using technology while the majority of them were co-located. They had the chance to interact with one another in person while also interacting with the technology. Solutions like this must be

potential. At the same time, newer tools such as the iPad also hold tremendous potential for both deep learning—and deep distraction. ■



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explored because they present educators and learners with the best of both models.

What Questions Are Yet to Explore?

1. How do we make online content engaging *and* challenging? We have seen online experiences that are engaging—the combination of engaging and intellectually challenging seems to be more elusive.

2. How do we see technology as more than the hardware in front of us? Jewish educators need to work more closely with software developers both to help produce more and better software and to better understand how software developers work and think. Software developers, in turn, would benefit from better understanding Jewish education and Jewish learning.

There is a great deal of low-hanging fruit that is underutilized in Jewish educational settings. The smart board is a powerful technology that few educators are trained to use to its fullest

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