Informal intercultural learning online:
Yahoo! Answers community and students' homework questions about the lessons of the Holocaust

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Abstract. This investigation suggests that apart from the discussions taking place within classrooms engaged in intercultural education, students' modes of learning are also potentially influenced informally by the reactions of members of social Questions and Answering (Q&A) communities, where advice is sought by students attempting to address their intercultural educational homework assignments. The analysis focuses on questions dealing with the lessons to be learnt from the Holocaust, answered by Yahoo! Answers community. While few of these answerers denied the existence of the Holocaust, the majority attempted to provide what they considered to be helpful comments, stressing mainly that the lessons of the Holocaust have not been learnt. Respondents point out that other cases of genocides and persecutions have occurred since 1945, that prejudice is alive and well, that by nature humans are cruel, that the world doesn't want to learn the lessons of the Holocaust and that it is important to be cautious of individual leaders. A smaller number were positive, and suggested that some Holocaust lessons have been learnt. Intercultural educators are called upon to familiarize themselves with Q&A communities, and help their students to become critical of the views shared on these platforms.

Key works: Intercultural education; Holocaust; online communities; homework; students

Introduction

According to Castagno (2009), intercultural education has multiple definitions and designated approaches; each stressing one facet rather than another. One of these, termed educating for critical awareness, aims to bring students closer to issues such as oppression, sexism and racism. Those supporting this definition of intercultural education suggest that it is about developing awareness of various histories and backgrounds and comparing them in order to enhance their understanding, especially with reference to racism (Coulby, 2006). Here the aim is to bring students to oppose any form of racism, support human rights and express mutual respect and tolerance of those different from them in terms of background, whether religious, ethnic, national or cultural (van Driel, 2003).

Resta and Laferrière (2015) voice their concern about the lack of access for many around the world to digital connectedness and to intercultural education, as they 'both share the goal of promoting opportunity for all people' (p. 2). Resta and Laferrière (2015) note further that 'traditional intercultural education, with its focus on educational issues concerning communities and their diversities, does not refer explicitly to technology, let alone digital technologies' (p. 2). This is indeed surprising, taking into account the tools Web 2.0 offers to engage present day students with highly charged historical events, leading them to recognize the relevance of these events for their own lives. It is even more surprising, considering the growing demand that children and teenagers use Web-based services for their school projects (Bilal, 2012).

Concurrently, studies have documented students approaching various social Questions and Answering (Q&A) communities, asking for advice from their members when struggling with their homework in a variety of subjects (Choi, Kitzie, & Shah, 2013; Gazan, 2007).

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Questions and Answering communities as a space for informal education

Scholars are in agreement that Q&A communities provide great informal learning opportunities (Gurevych, Bernhard, Ignatova, & Toprak, 2009; Salmerón, Macedo - Rouet, & Rouet, 2016), for two main reasons. First, as learning has been recognized as a social process, these online platforms offer informal learning opportunities for their users, as in the case of foreign language acquisition, as well as in other fields of education (Dettori & Torsani, 2014), through interaction conducted with many and different individuals (Jeon & Rieh, 2015). Second, Q&A communities can significantly reduce the burden experienced by the learner in terms of information overload, as students can use previously archived questions and their consequent human-generated answers (Gurevych et al., 2009). Most notably, although at the start, Q&A communities focused on factoid questions, in time they have evolved and have become hotbeds for discussing complex questions which require the advice or opinions of their members (Liu & Agichtein, 2008).

While members of Q&A communities hardly ever disclose their identities, age and/or nationality online (Jeon & Rieh, 2015), evidence indicates that many of them are students of various ages, seeking help with course assignments (Madden, Lenhart, Cortesi, Gasser, Duggan, Smith, & Beaton, 2013). Yet users of these platforms and especially primary and secondary school students are likely to lack the capacities to critically evaluate the answers received from anonymous respondents whose expertise on the subject matter is unknown (Salmerón et al., 2016), as their answers may suffer from low quality in terms of accuracy, completeness, and verifiability (Fichman, 2011). Thus, there is need to educate young users to become informed and critical consumers of the information gathered through social media (Kim, Sin & Tsai, 2014).

Existing literature focuses solely upon undergraduates' use of Q&A communities, documenting their perceptions of the communities as major sources of gathering information for coursework, especially by male students (Kim et al., 2014). These communities sources are approached when there is time pressure to complete assignments (Jeon & Rieh, 2015), and when students are motivated to acquire a multitude of opinions on a certain matter (Kitzie, Choi, & Shah, 2012). A study conducted among Yahoo! Answers Q&A community members, aged 18 to 82, found that although members posted a small number of questions in order to find help in completing coursework assignments in comparison to other types of questions, they expressed the highest level of satisfaction with the answers received (Zhang & Deng, 2014).

Inspection of the exchanges taking place in these Q&A communities, such as the aforementioned highly popular Yahoo! Answers (Y!A) reveals that their members are constantly engaged in issues such as "race" relations, human rights, the Holocaust and other cases of genocide, following questions posted by students seeking help with their homework assignments dealing with these issues.

As such, investigation of such exchanges can expose the informal learning taking place within such communities as students approach them with questions pertaining to education for critical awareness. Virtually no effort has been made to address the opinions shared within these communities with regard to intercultural education. Lazar and Litvak Hirsch (2015) studied the responses of Y!A members to requests for homework assistance dealing with questions to ask a Holocaust survivor and writing an essay about Holocaust remembrance. It was found that while most responses were serious and aimed to provide valid answers, these reflected common notions, and were rarely accepted positively by askers.

Van Drierl (2003) sees a close connection between intercultural education and Holocaust education, as 'both aspire to address issues relating to intolerance of diversity versus acceptance of diversity [and as] many teachers combine the two in their classrooms in some way or other' (p. 125). Thus, this study aims to expand current knowledge, by studying exchanges dealing with one facet which has considerable bearing upon intercultural education and Holocaust studies, namely, the lessons of the Holocaust as discussed by Y!A members when trying to assist students with their assignments.

The lessons to be drawn from the Holocaust

The lessons of the Holocaust have special importance for democratic societies (Schwartz, 1990), and while it has been suggested that there is a growing interest in the subject, Holocaust lessons seem not to be fully grasped by many people (Jedwab, 2010). Totten (1999) is wary of the interpretations of the Holocaust, suggesting the need to remember it in order to prevent similar occurrences, considering the fact that large scale massacres and acts of genocide have taken place since the end of World War II in different parts of the world. Critics of the attempts to derive any lessons from the Holocaust 'charge that the Holocaust has been overemphasized and its lessons over-generalized' (Schwartz, 1990, p.100), and they doubt whether any clear lessons can be transmitted to students (Short, 2003). Along with these voices, there are programs in which teachers discuss the possible lessons that can be derived from the Holocaust (Weinstein, 2006), based on the premise that discussions of these lessons with students could help students to understand the crucial role of civic virtues and moral values for active and responsible citizenship (Wegner, 1998).

Schwartz (1990) and Short (2003) have suggested the following lessons from the Holocaust that could be presented to students. These include the need to commemorate the events of the Holocaust, the realization that any vulnerable group can undergo discrimination and persecution, the need to protect human rights locally and globally, the implications of bystander behavior by individuals as well as by religious authorities while members of groups holding to other faiths are persecuted, and the results of extreme nationalization. Only a few studies have empirically assessed what types of lessons are drawn from the Holocaust by students and teachers. Wegner (1998) analyzed essays written by 200 eighth grade Wisconsin students who participated in a course focusing on the Holocaust, in response to the question: 'What lessons are there for my generation today?' Four main themes discussed by at least 50% of the students were identified. In 82% of the essays, students pointed to the need not to allow a Holocaust to happen again, followed by warnings against dehumanizing others, acting as bystanders and discriminating against individuals or groups (62%, 60% and 52% of essays, respectively). To lesser degree, 40% of the essays discussed the dangers of blindly following leaders, and in 12% of the essays, no lessons were discussed. Short (2005) conducted interviews with 31 British students aged 14 to 16, who participated in a half-day seminar dealing with the Holocaust and the Rwandan genocide. Of the questions asked, one was particularly relevant in the current context, namely, 'Do you think there are any lessons to be learnt from the Holocaust?' Nearly all of the respondents noted the need to be tolerant, and nearly a third of them advanced the view that all men are equal. A few indicated that the attempts to establish dictatorships, and scapegoating should be stopped in advance. More focused questions, such as the lessons to be learned from the Holocaust by the international community, by current British society, by the schools, and by the students themselves provided either responses that repeated what had been discussed earlier or claims that no lessons were to be learnt.

Short (2005) summarized his findings, suggesting that the students surveyed found it hard to work out the lessons of the Holocaust on their own. Unlike the two previously mentioned studies which employed open-ended questions, thus requiring respondents to employ inductive reasoning for the moral implications of the Holocaust (Wegner, 1998), Lazar, Chaitin, Gross and Bar-On (2004) presented a list of lessons that could be derived from the Holocaust in the format of closed questions to over 200 Jewish-Israeli adolescents who participated in a three month Holocaust seminar. It was found that these teenagers stressed that nations other than Germany and its allies bore responsibility for the atrocities of the Holocaust by turning a blind eye to what was happening. They also expressed the need to care for minorities wherever they are, the need to maintain Jewish unity, and suggested that Israel was the only place for Jews. The lessons suggesting that there was no room for strong national feelings and that almost everyone might participate in genocide under circumstances similar to those of the Holocaust, were considered far less valid by these respondents. Two surveys, one conducted among 600 English history teachers (Pettigrew, 2010), and another

among 2108 teachers (Foster, 2013) revealed a slight increase in the number of those emphasizing the lessons of the Holocaust as pinpointing the roots and ramifications of prejudice, racism and stereotyping in any society (67% and 71%, respectively). In both studies, a similar number (55% and 56%, respectively) discussed the lesson suggesting that similar human atrocities should never happen again. Foster (2013) further reported that the teachers surveyed refrained from teaching any explicit moral lessons to be drawn from the Holocaust. While these studies are telling, none have addressed how informal learning regarding the lessons of the Holocaust takes place within Q&A communities following a request for assistance in homework assignments posted by one of its members. In this study, attention is directed to such exchanges within the Y!A community.

Method

Questions presented to the Y!A community regarding the lessons of the Holocaust, phrased as 'What are some lessons of the Holocaust?' or 'What lessons were learnt from the Holocaust?' were examined. A content analysis of these answers was carried out to determine whether any recurring themes could be discerned.

Results

It was found that Y!A askers posted 30 questions dealing with the learned lessons of the Holocaust, during the years 2006 (n=2), 2007 (n=2), 2008 (n=4), 2009 (n=4), 2010 (n=8), 2011 (n=3), 2013 (n=5) and 2014 (n=2). These appeared mainly in the history (n=11) and the homework help (n=8) forums, with the rest in the education, sociology, philosophy, primary & secondary education, cultures and groups, and teaching forums (n=1 each). The questions were answered by 169 individual members of Y!A, with the number of answers ranging from 1 to 21 (M=5.80, SD=4.76).

It was found that 10 Y!A members denied the existence of the Holocaust with an additional 17 discussing their own Holocaust schooling. Thus, their answers were excluded from the analysis, leaving 142 eligible respondents, noting what they perceived to be the lessons of the Holocaust, presented in table 1.

Table 1: Lessons of the Holocaust noted by Y!A members and their percentages

	Percent of answerers (n=169)
Recent genocides and persecutions	17.8
Ongoing prejudice	14.2
Human cruelty	10.7
The world doesn't want to learn	9.5
Don't trust an individual leader	9.5
The dangers of bystander behavior	8.3
Hate leads to suffering	8.3
Equality of men	7.7
It could happen anywhere at any time	4.5
The dangers of Fascism	3.6
Self-reliance	3.6
Pacifism is suicide	3.6
Never again	3.6
Abstain from stereotyping	3
The implications of Holocaust denial	2.4
Criticizing Germans	1.5
Do your own homework	2.3
Other	12.6

Some of the themes were noted more than others, with the first group including the four main themes, discussed by more than 10% of eligible respondents.

The dominant response, noted by 17.8% of these respondents, mentioned acts of genocide and/or large scale persecutions which took place after the Holocaust.

Common here was the reply 'the Tutsis and Hutus of Rwanda come to mind. The crimes against the Muslims in Yugoslavia for the creation of the greater Serbia and Croatia. Cambodia, again millions put to death. This is all since and after 1945 and WW2'. 14.2% of eligible Y!A answerers claimed that 'prejudice is alive and well', 10.7% noted the evil nature of the human "race", stating, 'You can't trust humans to be human'. The second group of responses was noted by more than 6% of the eligible respondents. 9.5% of eligible answerers cautioned about political leaders stating 'don't trust an individual leader' or that 'the world doesn't want to learn'. 8.3% of these answerers pointed out that either 'hate leads to suffering' or warned against 'the dangers of bystander behavior', voicing the need to speak out against racism, and 7.7% stated, 'All men are created equal'. The third group includes statements noted by 1.5% to 4.5% of respondents. These include the suggestion that the Holocaust and similar events 'could happen anywhere at any time', noting 'the dangers of Fascism', the need for self-reliance as others will not safeguard your rights, abstaining from stereotyping, suggesting that 'pacifism is suicide', the need to prevent any similar events like the Holocaust, stated as 'never again', that Holocaust denial contributes to more acts of genocide, criticizing Germens for their conduct and telling the asker to 'Do your own homework'. The rest of the answers (12.6%) fall outside these themes, stating for example that 'the world will not learn any lessons because the Roman Catholic Church and its Jesuit minions are hell bent at total world domination'. These were categorized as "other".

Discussion

Q!A communities have been recognized as a platform in which informal learning takes place (Gurevych et al., 2009; Salmerón, et al., 2016), and this is most notably true for children and teenagers (Madden et al., 2013), since these communities have become point of attraction for getting personalized answers to complex questions (Liu & Agichtein, 2008). Yet caution is needed, especially considering primary and secondary school students who address these communities, as they often lack the critical knowledge needed to correctly evaluate the knowledge offered by the members of these communities (Salmerón et al., 2016). Therefore, there is a need to familiarize students with these communities and educate them to be become informed and critical consumers of received inputs (Kim et al., 2014). The current study focused on the lessons to be learned from the Holocaust as discussed by members of the Y!A community following requests by students for assistance with their homework. Perhaps the relatively small number of questions analyzed here may suggest that researching Q!A community discussions on intercultural education should not a priority. However, as Lazar and Litvak Hirsch (2015), who looked at the answers provided by Y!A members following coursework dealing with Holocaust remembrance questions, have suggested, this is hardly the case in view of the popularity of Q!A communities, their open archives which enable members and non-members alike to utilize the stored generated knowledge, and the fact the knowledge garnered can be recycled, as the member who today asked a question, may use the inputs s/he has gathered, to answer another's question in the future.

The current results suggest that, similar to many others who find it hard to grasp the lessons of the Holocaust (Jedwab, 2010; Short, 2005; Wegner, 1998), Y!A members are no exception.

Of the 18 themes discerned, eight could be classified as resonant with moral implications of the Holocaust. These include references to human cruelty, refraining from trusting an individual leader, the hate-suffering nexus, equality of all men, the implications of bystander behavior, the dangers of

Fascism, the need for self-reliance and abstaining from stereotyping. While such statements hint at the positive notion that the lessons of the Holocaust have been absorbed, others are far more pessimistic and grim. This is the case with the dominant theme, that other large scale atrocities have been carried out since the Holocaust, presented by Y!A members and echoing Totten's (1999) perspective on the issue, as well those stating clearly that the world does not want to learn and that prejudice is alive and well. This suggests that a student approaching a Q&A community when faced with a homework assignment dealing with the lessons of the Holocaust, in unlikely to find a clear-cut answer, considering the divisions of opinions. Thus, questioners are left to figure out on their own what to make of these offerings and how to understand their homework.

The current investigation provides an initial attempt to look into intercultural education as it takes place online following questions posted by students requesting help; thus, it has focused upon the Y!A community's outputs. Future research is needed to ascertain students' perspectives on this gathered information and how, if at all, they make use of it. In addition, one may ask whether intercultural educators are familiar with the workings of Q&A communities and whether they investigate reactions to community outputs, considering that in at least some cases, as demonstrated here, these echo attitudes expressed by experts in the field such as Totten (1999) and findings gathered from students and teachers (Lazar et al., 2004; Foster, 2013; Pettigrew, 2010; Short, 2005) juxtaposed with views expressed by Holocaust deniers. Such acquaintance would help teachers to direct students to become critical of the views and opinions shared on these platforms with regard to the current and other intercultural education-related subjects.

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