

Chapter 9

‘Move Lips, Move Minds and Make New Meanings Flare’: Using ICT to Overcome Prejudice and Discrimination

Colin Latchem

Open Learning Researcher and Consultant, Australia

ABSTRACT

The lessons of history and findings of social psychologists suggest that there will always be some clash of cultures in the world. Nevertheless, it is important to try to find ways of overcoming prejudice and discrimination. These demean us as well as others, and the challenges facing our world require everyone to try to reconcile their differences and work together. This chapter discusses the roots and causes of prejudice and discrimination and, using examples from around the globe, illustrates ways in which ICT can be used to unlearn these learned behaviours in educational and community contexts.

ROOTS AND CAUSES OF PREJUDICE AND DISCRIMINATION

For the occasion of the 2004 European Union Enlargement Ceremony in Dublin, the Irish Poet Laureate Seamus Heaney penned the following lines in his poem, *Beacons at Bealtaine* (see <http://www.jstor.org/pss/30022027>):

So on a day when newcomers appear

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Let it be a homecoming and let us speak

The unstrange word, as it behoves us here

*Move lips, move minds and make new meanings
flare.*

It would be difficult to have a better clarion call for accepting different peoples, cultures and beliefs, working for community solidarity, and rejecting prejudice and discrimination.

Prejudice and discrimination are not universals humans are born with. They are learned behaviours. According to Fishbein (2004), social psychologists believe that there is a continuum of causes for prejudice and discrimination, with individualistic or psychological causes at one pole and cultural/historical influences at the other. Prejudice and discrimination can be internalized in early childhood and then reinforced and made socially acceptable over the years. They result from dominant groups who promulgate these beliefs in order to retain their positions of power and privilege. Rapley (2001) observes that establishing dominant and subordinate groups according to ethnicity, race, gender and so on derives from a primordial tribal instinct to protect the 'insiders' against the 'outsiders'. In extreme forms, we see this manifesting itself in places like Rwanda or the former Yugoslavia, where self-interested leaders, seeking their own ends, destroy social harmony and leave people to suffer.

Soutphommasane (2009) sees other causes for prejudice and discrimination – the challenges to national, community and group identity by globalization, mass migration, social liberalism and consumerism. Globalization affects local economies and triggers class and cultural transformations. Mass migration leads to multicultural societies. And social liberalism and consumerism give rise to a diversity of social norms and a loss of unifying myths. Beevor & Cooper (2007) conclude that in an increasingly fragmented world, people hold ever more firmly onto their tribal loyalties. Distinctions grow between rich and poor and different ethnic groups, there is little interaction between them, and people stay within their physical or psychological safety zones. Cohen (2008) also attributes the re-assertion of national, linguistic, religious and racial or ethnic identities to the barrier-breaking sweep of technology. He observes 'Connection and fragmentation vie. The Internet opens worlds and minds, but also offers opinions to reinforce every prejudice. You're never alone out there; some idiot will always back you.

The online world doesn't dissolve tribes. It gives them global reach.'

Prejudice involves stereotyping—prejudging people according to race, socio-cultural background, gender, sexual preference, age, physical attributes and so on. Stereotyping can lead to negative or positive discrimination. In extreme forms, negative discrimination results in hostility, acts of bigotry and hate crimes. The dominant groups may be unwilling to acknowledge that there is any discrimination, while those who are discriminated against develop deep-seated distrust and suspicion and this weakens social harmony. Positive discrimination—giving preferential treatment to people on the basis of race, colour, gender, sexuality, religion, nationality and so on—can again lead to alienation on both sides, being seen as tokenism, condescending or patronizing.

Attitudes towards outsiders and minority groups may not result from sustained indoctrination or propaganda. They may derive from snippets of information here and bits of tittle-tattle there. They may also be influenced through newspapers, radio, and television which tend to stress differences to make a good story and feed on people's anxieties in order to attract readers, listeners and viewers. Unfortunately, adverse opinion, even if only half-believed, can have a ripple effect throughout society and ramifications no-one can foresee. However, since prejudice and discrimination are learned behaviours, they can be unlearned. It may take time and determination to counter these attitudes and those who try may come up against those who are intolerant of others' beliefs and practices and are keen to provoke and polarize. Even some of these may not be entirely beyond reason, and some of their beliefs may stem from legitimate concerns that need to be heeded. As Blears (2007) observes, it is vital to engage with a broad range of opinion across different cultures in order to understand and tackle the root causes, take on the poisonous arguments, and unpick the distorted ideas peddled by violent extremists.

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