

The Intergenerational Program:
Preserving Heritage in a Technological Society

I would like to say that I belong to the "Ice Age" generation. When I was a child there was no refrigerator in our home. We had an icebox. We used to carry ice blocks in a Utah cloth up to the third floor where we lived. My generation didn't grow up with such developed technologies as today's youngsters. A telephone was a rare thing and a telephone conversation was a happening.

When I was growing up even a telephone line was hard to get. One had to wait for years to get one. When I was 12 I got my first watch. My twelve year-old grandchild has a few watches. I watched television for the first time at age 25 when I arrived in the US. I became acquainted with a PC only 16 years ago.

The tremendous technological changes that flooded our lives in the last 50 or 60 years were quick and significant. When a new technology, especially one that has to do with communications, becomes widespread it brings about changes in tools, in ways of thinking, in social processes and in social structures. The "invasion" of computers into our lives opens up new possibilities

and gives room to social mobility.

The young generation, so it seems, speak "high-tech" as their mother tongue and their natural environment is a technological one, whereas the technological revolution, has passed over many of the older members in our society. The young ones seem to be born holding the "mouse cord" in their hands while many seniors tend to be living in a waste land as far as technology is concerned.

In this situation, it is appropriate to have a meeting between the two polaric groups, the young speakers of high-tech and the much older ones for whom the world of computer and the Internet is sometimes an unknown land with a foreign and difficult language.

In this meeting, between the young and the old, the young ones teach the language of the new country, the land of technology, to the old ones.

About 12 years ago I initiated and started: The Intergenerational Program : Preserving Heritage in a Technological Society. In this program young students, grades 5-10, tutor seniors at computer and Internet skills and learn from their older students, a chapter in the latter's personal history.

Together they write a digital version of the senior's personal history, scan pictures, albums, and documents, and search for information on the Net as well as in other sources. Hopefully all these stories will be uploaded to a designated site on the Internet.

An African proverb says that when an old person dies an entire library is set on fire. In the intergenerational program I set out to preserve whole libraries, treasured in the minds of the elderly, by the means of the new technologies.

On the one hand our society admires youth, but it also yearns for something that used to be and is gone. One can understand this yearning against the background of ever-changing technology and incessant innovations. There is a yearning for everlasting values, there is a feeling of weariness from the rapidity of technological changes, and there is a dire desire for holding on to a meaningful and lasting narrative. The older generation supplies us with this narrative that connects between the past and the present, between what used to be and what is going to be.

I started The Intergenerational Program in one school, The Alon School in Kiryat Anavim. Now, almost 12 years later, it has been implemented in many schools in Israel. I must admit that I was and

still am very moved each time I watch the bond created between the new and old generations.

These meetings endow the two generations with interest and meaning.

The postmodern society is a society in which relationships and connections are loose. However, a society draws its strength from the bond between its members. The Intergenerational Program strengthens intergenerational connections and existing heritage knowledge and creates new connections where they are lacking. In other words, the program aims at connecting the various sectors and generations in society and at preserving the stories of the past of its senior members by the new technological skills of its young members.

As previously mentioned, a key issue in the program is the co-writing of a digital book, based on a chapter in the personal history of the participating senior.

Guided by their young teachers, all the seniors who participated in the project wrote digital books based on their past history. Most of the seniors chose stories connected to major events in their life.

The children were learning history from living resources, and they were taking part in its recording. They were fascinated, captivated by the personal element of the stories and at times extatic about their new role as “history writers”.

Excerpts from two digital books

1.A chapter from an digital book written by ZIP 65+ and Y. a boy in 6th grade.

Chapter I : The Nurse

Jerusalem, 1936.

Fifteen minutes after my mother gave birth to me, a red headed baby girl, ...my mother panicked. Her hands were paralyzed.

My father went looking for a woman to nurse me in Beith Zafafa.

Y. who has been working with z. was stupefied : why didn't they give you a formula and that's it? He asked, why go and look for a nursing woman? Z. gave Y. a lesson in history. She told him about

the very many things that abound nowadays, but which didn't exist sixty + years ago.

The work of the children with the seniors helps debunk unfounded myth and prejudice.

We asked the “young teachers” what they thought about the Third Agers prior to working with them and how their view of the seniors changed in light of their work. Here are some of their comments:

- I thought seniors aren't interested in the same things I am. I found that they do. Both my old lady and myself are into mysticism and baking. P.(girl)8th grade.
- We share the same areas of interest : we enjoyed surfing the internet and reading material we searched. I thought all seniors were interested in is knitting. Z. (boy) 5th grade
- I thought they (the seniors) aren't interested in computers and the internet but it so turns out that they are. N. (girl) 6th grade

The advantages of learning from Children

We wanted to learn from the seniors whether there was any advantage in learning computer and internet skills from young

children, or it was just a nice gimmick. We decided to ask our “old learners” about this.

Here are some of their answers:

Q. what’s the advantage of having children as tutors?

- M.(65) its easier to open up to children
- Z. (65+) the child is born from the computer... they give themselves totally...
- R. (55+) if we were to be tutored by a trained teacher I would not come.. the spontaneity of the children...their flow...these are great things... .
- There is much tenderness in the young child. I feel so relaxed working with a young child its great. I don’t fret when I make a mistake. I tell my “young teacher” I don’t know and the child simply accepts it.

A. 70+

A good program is a program in which people are both giving and receiving.

Both parties children and seniors, function both as teachers and as learners.

The children tutor the seniors at computer and internet skills and the seniors teach the young ones a lesson in history. The children and the seniors write **together** a computerized chapter based on

the personal history of the senior tutored. **Together** they surfed the Internet in their quest for information; **together** they scanned pictures from albums and documents archives, related to the senior's life story.

The seniors don't function only as receivers of technological skills mastered by the young ones, but they are also contributors to the "young teachers" from their vast knowledge and experience.

Reciprocity was and is manifested in many ways in this program.

M. a fifth grade pupil, had the following to say:

" I had a lot of emotional difficulties this year. But my "old lady" listened to me and "fixed" my head.

Each meeting with her was like walking into a beautiful land" ..

The meeting between the seniors and the young ones mitigates the zappiness and franticness of the young, refutes prejudice and encourages and fosters patience and tolerance. As for the older members in our society, it energizes and stimulates their minds and zest for life, opens up new worlds and brings joy to life as well as a feeling of belonging.

And as an end note,I would like to share with you my vision:

I would like to enlarge the scope of my program and to implement it wherever there is a need for bridging the intergenerational gap.

I believe that this need is ever growing in light of the longer life span on the one hand and the postmodern technologically oriented society which places much emphasis on the new and the changing on the other hand. In such a world the past might loses its importance. The voices of past knowledge and experience become obsolete and the chasm between the generations, the old generation and the young one, becomes huge.

So my dream or vision is :

- to bridge the intergenerational gap
- to develop a working model channeling children's mastery of computer and internet skills in order to create new social interactions
- to reconnect seniors to the rapidly changing world and society
- to create an on-going reservoir of knowledge at risk of disappearance
- to create a **network for Knowledge Preservation and** a virtual library of memories at risk. ("A Bank of Memories")

And in other words-to help create a better society based upon the values of respect , caring and sharing.

