

Education, Antiracism and the Web: European Perspectives ¹

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Abstract

In recent years, Sweden has taken a lead in promoting national and international policies aimed at combating racism, intolerance and xenophobia, while the UK, with its longer history of working with diversity, has been less prominent in this field. At the same time, the European Union, of which both countries are members, has funded a project linking antiracism, technology and education. As researchers involved with Eurokid project aimed at developing antiracist websites for young people of 10 years and upwards, we have been taken aback at the different responses, support and publicity for the different national websites, and this forms the main focus of this paper. Drawing on the work of Manuel Castells and others, we explore questions concerning the reasons for these different levels of interest against a backdrop of changing conceptions of identity and both countries' position in the global economy. We conclude the paper with a reflection on how these policies, discourses and practices contribute to current understandings of governance, technology and pedagogy in the different countries and more generally.

Objectives

The main aim of the paper is to investigate and reflect on the discourses surrounding the European-funded antiracist website project *Eurokid* which was involved, from 2000 to 2003, in the research, design, implementation, and evaluation of the website, as a pedagogical tool to challenge racist and anti-democratic ideas among young people. *Eurokid's* main task was to create and deliver on-line, national home-language (plus English) websites in four countries (Spain, Italy, Britain, Sweden), with a fifth linked Europe-wide website to follow. Thus, the overall project had three parts:

- Development of a specific form of on-line teaching and learning resource, which addresses antiracism and multicultural issues and which is freely available to schools, and to anyone with access to the Internet.
- Investigation of young people's experiences of racism, to inform web content.
- Research on the process and outcomes of a specific form of web-development, and its pedagogical application and outcomes.

Currently, three project websites are active (*Britkid*, *Spanishkid* and *Swedkid*) linked by a *Eurokid* portal², but this format has also proved attractive to other countries, for example, websites are currently in existence or being planned in Holland and the Czech Republic. Also the format has proved useful for other issues such as bullying (for example, see <http://www.coastkid.org/>)

Theoretical frameworks

We have drawn in particular on a body of work which addresses the rise of information technology, issues around racism and nations and the kind of everyday settings in which racism takes place. In seeking to understand the relationship between the Net, education and

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² Spanish website <www.spanishkid.org> / <www.diversidadjuvenil.org>; Swedish website <www.swedkid.nu>; British website <www.britkid.org>; and European website <www.eurokid.org>.

anti/racism, we group concepts under three headings: the Information Age; racism, nation and globalisation; and everyday racism.

i. *The Information Age*

Manuel Castells (e.g.1996) shows how technology has transformed society and culture and how technology itself is transformed by shifting materialities and identities at global, national and local levels. Of particular significance is the way in which culture is seen to act as a filter through which globalisation flows, mediated by local, provincial and parochial politics and conditions. Castells argues that economic globalisation and the technological revolution are but two elements among many that are transforming concepts of consciousness, identity and being. Castells does not attempt to simplify what is clearly a complex picture but rather offers a bricolage (or map or collage) of the defining features of our times. These include, for example: economic globalisation and interdependence; reworking of the relationship between the economy, state and society; use of new technology to satisfy hitherto unachievable (including illicit and taboo) desires; tendency of social movements towards fragmentation; crisis of individual and collective; search for new identities and resurgence of older identities and fundamentalisms; resurgence of nationalism, racism and xenophobia; and social fragmentation and social exclusion (Castells, 1996).

Thus Castells points to the emergence simultaneously of the Network Society and of worldwide shifts towards increased inequality, nationalism, racism and xenophobia. He notes that while offering the promise of limitless opportunities, global networks also operate to exclude:

global networks of instrumental changes selectively switch on and off individuals, groups, regions and even countries according to their relevance in fulfilling the goals processed in the network, in a relentless flow of strategic decisions. It follows a fundamental split between abstract, universal instrumentalism, and historically rooted, particularistic identities. *Our societies are increasingly structured around a bipolar opposition between the Net and the Self.* (Castells, 1996, (1): 3, Castells' emphasis).

Thus, Castell's work is important because it offers an understanding of the relationship between the Net and the Self, and also a global picture which helps contextualise and illuminate our reading of the project and its outcomes. Castells further offers a space for human action and agency which is sometimes missing from other forms of theorising.

ii. *Racism, nation and globalisation*

As a complement to Castells' work, a recent analysis of the impact of globalisation at the level of the nation is provided by Pred who links global pressures to local situated practices in Sweden. In particular, he identifies during the 1990s, the intensification of cultural racism, proliferation of negative racial stereotypes and continuing spatial segregation of the 'non-Swedish'. Global economic restructuring, Pred argues, has generated experiences which have lent themselves to cultural reworkings as distinctive expressions of racism – even in such previously enlightened and liberal countries as Sweden (the point of the title of Pred's book). Pred captures the zeitgeist in his introduction:

[Writing] *Even in Sweden* has been anything but easy....I have borne the intense discomfort of bearing witness to an immense tragedy, of observing good intentions coming completely apart, of seeing what was once arguably the world's most generous

refugee policy, what was once a remarkably humane and altruistic response to cruelties committed abroad, become translated at home into the cruelties of pronounced housing segregation, extreme labor-market discrimination, almost total (de facto) social apartheid, and frequently encountered bureaucratic paternalism (Pred, 2000: xii)

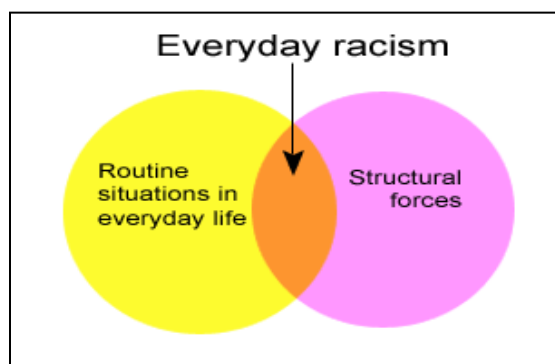
‘Racisms’, defined by Pred (2000: xiv) as ‘a constellation of relations, practices and discourses, a constellation of becoming phenomena. . . .’ are seen as unavoidable in present-day Sweden. Like Castells and others, Pred argues that racism, although shaped and intensified by globalisation processes, is produced locally and involves ordinary people. Thus, he writes that it is:

through participation in particular *locally situated practices*-
that individuals and groups become racialized
that migrants, refugees and minorities
have their racialization again and again reinforced,
regardless of the differences in their biographical background
or the diversity of their previous social experiences
and subjective positions
(Pred, 2000: 18).

iii. **Everyday racism**

Our third theoretical source is Essed who defines everyday racism as repetitive, recurrent and familiar practices: ‘racism is racism, but not all racism is everyday racism’ (Essed, 1991: 3). It is thus embedded in the culture and social order, and is more than structure and ideology. Essed focuses on practices rather than the individual, and thus counters the view that racism is exclusively about ‘being a racist’. She argues that it should not be assumed that all ‘Whites are agents of racism and all Blacks¹ are the victims’ (Essed, 1991: 43), but that everyday life is a starting point for any analysis. Essed conceptualises the everyday world as sub-structured by race, ethnicity, class and gender, with ‘everyday racism’ interpreted as racism integrated into daily situations (see figure 1), connecting structural forces of racism with routine situations. In linking ideological dimensions of racism to individual attitudes, everyday racism becomes part of the expected, and unquestioned, and that which the dominant group conceives of as normal.

Figure 1: Everyday racism



Power and dominance are central to the understanding of everyday racism. Thus, as Bhavnani (2001) points out, racism is not just a matter of bias and prejudice, but of power relations

which create certain domains of conflicts. The dominant group is likely to contest claims that racism is present and pervasive in everyday life, and will rather identify with perpetrators of racism rather than with minorities or people of colour. This often results in accusations of over-sensitivity and exaggeration but also ‘that others probably didn’t mean it that way’, as a part of a denial of responsibility (Essed 1991: 7).

Denial of racism is present in many societies (Essed lives in the USA) and in their education systems. For example, where minorities are not particularly visible, this can be summed up in the statement ‘no problem here’ (Gaine, 1987). Not having a problem ‘here’, largely the consequence of proportionally few minorities in the local population, is also one of many aspects of denial identified by Jones (Jones, 1999). Research in Sweden indicates a parallel picture where denial of racism is a common strategy to avoid confronting and recognizing racism in the immediate vicinity (Lange & Hedlund, 1998; Integrationsverket; 2005). Similarly, teachers seem unaware of the presence of racism and report that racism is not a feature, where at the same time students speak of their experiences of school racism (Parszyk, 1999).

Concepts such as ‘everyday’, ‘front room’ and ‘wardrobe’ racism, have emerged as an indicator of the covert nature of much racism. Consistent with the work of Essed (1991), thus, everyday racism may be defined as reproduced in taken-for-granted, familiar and everyday routines. It emerges through language and behaviour in, for example, conversation, film, school materials, television, workplaces etc., and is performed by ordinary as well as elite individuals and groups.

Website methodology

These sets of theories have both helped us design the websites and also guided out evaluations of their outcomes. Briefly, designed for young people of 10 years and upwards, the main task of *Eurokid* was to develop websites which are able to present and discuss a range of experiences concerning racism, ethnicity and identity, as reported in research especially carried out for the project, and more generally. In so doing, the project sought to illuminate, challenge and intervene in the processes of racialisation in the countries involved. Visitors to the websites are thus encouraged to interact with the characters presented and as a consequence, to reflect on their own ethnicity, identity and approaches to racism and antiracism. Thus the virtuality of the net, a notably youth-oriented medium, is used to problematise and ‘trouble’ young people’s experiences and perspectives regarding what it is to be ‘truly’ or ‘newly’ British or Swedish or Spanish or European.

Visitors can enter the websites by choosing one of a range of different characters of varying ethnicities and identities (majority, minority, and hybrid). Once a character has been chosen, an introduction is offered to the character’s family, culture, religion, interests, problems etc. The website-user is then directed to other parts of the website where he/she is able to take part in activities and dialogues connected with other characters’ experiences and actions. Pictures and speech bubbles illustrate each encounter and provide guidance on how to access other activities and areas of the websites including informational texts relating to the issues raised. The websites also provide opportunities in certain contexts for communication with other users, writing comments on aspects of the material, and/or reading comments from other website users. (For a more detailed description and evaluation of the project, see Gaine et al, 2003; Hällgren & Weiner, 2003; Hällgren, forthcoming; Gaine and Weiner, forthcoming).

Project Outcomes

A variety of outcomes emerged from the project largely concerning efficacy, suitability etc. which we have written about elsewhere (in particular see Gaine & Weiner, forthcoming). In this paper we focus on the different levels of support for and interest in the project in the various countries involved, and how this affected the overall realisation of project aims. In the *European context*, for example, it was chosen in 2001 as an example of good practice for presentation at the European Council of Ministers and in 2003, was awarded an Evens Foundation Prize for Intercultural Education. It also attracted much interest at various annual conferences of the European Educational Research Association, and gained the support of a publisher interested in the relationship between the Web and paper publishing. In *Sweden* the project attracted enthusiastic responses from government ministers, commercial companies, the media, national education agencies, local municipalities and schools (as well as immediate hostility and hate-mail from neo-Nazi groups). In *Britain*, though initially funded by a major charity, and although much welcomed in some localities and schools, the response from government was less emphatic. In *Spain*, while deriving some support from local schools and individual advisors and academics, the researchers had to struggle more or less on their own. And the *Italian* part of the project failed altogether partially due to the political context, nationally and locally. The political orientation of the various countries at the time (Sweden – social democrat, UK – New Labour, Spain and Italy – conservative) was clearly a factor in the range of responses to the project.

In exploring why the project derived such different responses, the influence of globalisation and how it has been enacted and managed at a specific historical and cultural conjuncture are central. Our analysis is three-fold, focusing on: why institutions and policy-makers have responded in different ways to *Eurokid*, its exemplification and value as a pedagogical innovation; and any implications for the future.

Differential impact of the project

The promotion of IT in educational settings, evident in many countries, can be seen as an example of a discursively organised reform that seeks to address the uncertainties of the network society in an era of globalisation, at the same time as dealing with national concerns regarding global competition and the need for a stable society. As a small country, with a high standard of living and welfare, newly incorporated into the European Union, Swedish policy-makers and industrialists have been aware of the global pressures that seek to undermine the country's economic gains, made in the post-world war II period. Sweden's international reputation remains one of a unique combination of market economy and strong public sector with "one of the most comprehensive and generous systems of welfare provision in Europe and the world" (Gould, 1996: 91). The predominance of social democratic policies and popular support for a large welfare state, however, are at odds with the move of capital out of Sweden, and a weakening national currency. In this sense, Sweden is both a modern and postmodern state - a nation in transition from centralised collectivism to competitive individualism. The appeal of the website project, it is argued, is that it is both symbolic and pragmatic in Sweden state's attempt to smooth the fissures between the modern, postmodern and even post, postmodern. (Justitiedepartementet, 2004; Utbildningsdepartementet, 1998; Hällgren & Weiner, 2003).

In the case of the UK, the use and take-up of IT is perhaps more contradictory and multidimensional. There is a two-sided narrative of hope: on the one hand, about a transformed interactive, computer literate society and workforce, and expanded boundaries of knowledge in the humanities; and on the other, instrumental notions that do little more than aim for the development of good keyboard skills. This reflects/represents the political orientation of New Labour in Britain since 1997, which has been largely neo-liberal though displaying some residual social democratic undercurrents. Thus, the intrusive and often punitive power of a national curriculum and performance testing of pupils (and schools and teachers) in England and Wales, as well as directives about citizenship and community (deriving to some extent from the Europe Union), mean that teachers are caught in contradictory currents of performativity (Ball, 2001) and various social concerns, not least, the attainment of racial justice. In Spain and Italy, IT is less developed in education compared to the other countries in the project (Hellsten, 2006). Moreover concern about racism is a relatively recent phenomenon in terms of immigration, and less of an interest for conservative and neo-liberal government regimes of those countries (Zuffiaure, 2005). For example, a law passed in 2000 in Spain concerning the labour situation of illegal immigrants makes no mention of issues of racism and antiracism.

Pedagogical Innovation and implications?

The overall evaluations of the websites themselves were generally positive. For example, there was a positive response of young people to the sites, in particular, in terms of visually engagement and attention-maintenance. Additionally the device of raising issues though characterisation and (sometimes) unresolved dialogues worked in the sense of raising and discussing difficult issues in a safe space. The sites seemed to raise the issue of racism in ways which were intelligible to young people and which they were able to relate to. And the 'non preaching' style was effective in that it produced a positive response, although notable in the Swedish context, was that the teacher educators and some student-teachers were more suspicious of website content than school students, journalists, politicians or commentators more generally. Significantly, the role of the teacher in organising the learning experience and guiding the discussion emerge as a key factor in the use of the sites. However, the one major downside of this form of web development were that teachers generally felt insecure regarding the working of the equipment (web-connections, computer hardware), and it was difficult to incorporate in their everyday pedagogical practice.

The educational implications of the project, in our view, lies in the understanding that curriculum development such as that for *Eurokid* cannot be undertaken in a vacuum. Indeed context is highly significant and influential. Drawing on our theoretical sources, we can see from Castells how globalisation is mediated by the national and local, for instance in the formation of education systems and school curricula but also how information technology and cultural identity (both cornerstones of the project) are part of a wider globalising bricolage of the Information Age. Moreover, Castells shows that global networks (whatever claims are made) operate to exclude as well as include, producing the 'Haves and Have-nots' of the information age' (Wresch, 1996). The discursive positioning of the project in the different countries provides clear evidence of the complexity of curriculum development. The project has had greater impact in Northern European and/or more progressive political regimes where the presence of racism is an embarrassment, and the use of information technology, an attractive and marketable solution. Where racism is less unacceptable and information technology less well developed, the project did not fare so well.

We can also take from Pred in his work on Sweden and also Essed in the USA, that racism involves locally situated practices and routes through everyday life. These theoretical understandings were utilised in the *antiracist* design of the websites so that experiences of racism were drawn from young people in local contexts to make them more meaningful to the target audience – young people of 10 and upwards in the different countries.

The initial aim of the project, which was to develop similar national antiracist websites based on an original British prototype, thus did not develop as expected. Some of the reasons were material – for example, the Swedish project gained extensive funding to go further than expected, whilst the Spanish and Italian projects had to struggle to survive. Others were political and cultural as we have tried to show. We suggest as a consequence that it is not possible to develop a one-for-all prototype model – rather, researchers and developers need to be conscious both of the difference and shared perspectives among students and professionals across national borders, and of the wider political and cultural ramifications of predominant educational discourses and policy orientations. Even though all the partners in the project were from countries in the European Union with shared values at least at the general level, in practice each country's cultural and political priorities shaped the course of the progress of the project as well as website design and content.

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ⁱ Essed uses capital letters when writing 'White' and 'Black'.