

ISRAELI TEACHERS' OPEN ONLINE FORUMS VIA WEB SITES – A PRELIMINARY INTERPRETIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS

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Abstract

The quickening pace in the open and asynchronous online forums that are operating in portals and other sites (Discussion Forums via the World-Wide-Web) is also evident in Israel. The Israeli portals as well as other portals present a list of hundreds of forums on different subjects of interest that are open to all. Also present on this list are open forums for teachers. These forums, in contrast to newsgroups via mail, are considered a relatively new phenomenon; world research which focuses specifically on their affairs is limited. When referred to online forums of Israeli teachers research is miniscule (see for example: Sivan, 2000).

This research is a preliminary study which for the first time portrays in depth open forums of Israeli teachers which are active on websites. This is done in order to subsequently identify and analyze methodological procedures and theoretical ideas and assist in charting a meticulous and reliable path for their integration into educational research. In other words: the paper that is presented here demonstrates forums of teachers as methodological means and not as a research objective by itself.

The research which within its framework the forums were characterized as methodological means deals in the meaning of two of the teachers' roles in the Israeli education system: the role of the professional teacher who teaches particular subject matter and the role of the homeroom educator ("Mehanech", see: Gordon & Ackerman, 1984). Those two roles are the structural-organizational materialization of schools in Israel towards the two major tasks of school: to impart contents and knowledge in preparing the new generation for the labor market (instrumental order) and to convey the dominant values of society (expressing order) (Bernstein, 1975). The primary responsibility of the professional teacher in Israeli schools is on the first role, and of the homeroom educator - on the second. Two open forums of teachers were therefore portrayed in the current paper: a forum of biology teachers as a forum of professional teachers, and a generic forum of teachers as teachers who many amongst them are fulfilling the role of homeroom educators.

Two questions guided the research: what do teachers talk about in the open forums, and what is the most popular subject? In addition, the measure of the overt and covert contents which refer to the moral aspects of the teacher's role in contrast to

practical aspects that are manifested in the implementation and exercise of the teaching subjects has been examined.

For the purpose of this study the method of contents analysis has been adopted where at the stage of encoding messages, Ahuvia's approach of interpretive contents analysis has been implemented (Ahuvia, 2001). The process of interpretive encoding is suited for cases in which the researcher is the interpreter who is attempting to discover significance in the overt and covert layers of the text, such as in the case of this paper, where it may form an answer to the problematic character of the traditional encoding in researches where the object of discovering moral views in text is the goal (Merten, 1996). Encoding reliability has been achieved by what Ahuvia terms as public justifiability when the researcher-interpreter promises readers access to raw data and to the manner of its analysis where they are the ones who judge his work. The paper was therefore written in electronic format, and it is used as a unique example to the correlation between the manner of publishing the paper, methodology and research reliability.

The findings point to the practical aspects of the role as the most favorite subject for discussion in the two types of open forums. Nevertheless, in the generic teachers' forum a not insignificant number of messages were found which overtly and covertly discussed the moral aspects of the role. Some of them presented profound and rich discussions concerning significant educational issues. Despite the prominence of practical discussions in online teachers' forums that was found in a number of previous papers (for example: Selwyn, 2000), few are the papers that presented tangible findings as to the presence of significant discussions in philosophical and moral issues in online forums (Harrington & Quinn-Leaving, 1996), all the more so in website based forums that are open to teachers wherever they may be. Focused research on open online forums for teachers may contribute towards the scientific effort which has been deliberating for two decades the potential of Computer-Mediated Communication to promote critical reflection of teachers and by that to essentially improve the quality of education (Selwyn, 2000; Hawkes & Romiszowski, 2001; Zhao & Rop, 2001).

The methodological implications of the paper could contribute in refining the research in the domain of communication mediated by computer between teachers, which currently lacks meticulous methods of research (Zhao & Rop, 2001). The paper deliberates two essential methodological issues: the legitimacy of using the contents of messages in open forums for research purposes, and the possibility of comparing between forums. The first issue exposes the thin line between the concept of the open forum as public domain or private domain and the position of the researcher towards each of the concepts. The second issue points to the problematic character that exists in performing valid and reliable comparison in contents analysis between website based two online forums, and offers as a first step in solving the problem three conditions for performing the comparison: similarity in the time period for analysis, the quantity of messages and the number of participants.

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