

Developing Social Skills by the Implementation of New Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in Religious Education in Primary School: A Teaching Scenario

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Abstract: The dynamic and structural component of exploiting Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the teaching process can enhance the multimodal social skills of students in the teaching of Religious education. The applicable functionalism of alternative teaching approaches with the familiarization of ICT, in the teaching of Religious education, strengthen the faculty of student's effective interaction not only with the course content but also with the development of good interpersonal relations. The exploitation of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the teaching process is used as a mean for students' activation and substantial participation during teaching via their sensory receptive capacity. Information and Communication Technology (ICT), in Religious education in the Primary School, are energetic means of multisensory pupil's activation in the process of identifying and comprehending knowledge, in the configuration of values and in the field of interactive opportunities for active participative action and communication. The purpose of this paper is to present the possibilities of the development of students' social skills with the contribution of programming, interactive, multimedia, hypermedia, simulation and modeler potential of new technologies in the teaching of Religious education in Primary school. In the present paper a teaching scenario for the functional exploitation of the ICT in teaching the lesson of Religious Education is suggested. It is referred to a case study in the fifth grade in a Greek elementary school. The results emerged by a structured questionnaire for the cognitive level, the participation and cooperation demonstrated by the students during the instructional scenario. The implementation of the ICT tools maximized the students' academic achievements, highlighted the potential of using effective alternative teaching methods and generated a better and more productive learning environment.

Key words: Information and Communication Technology (ICT), social skills, teaching process, religious education

1. Introduction

The requirements of contemporary educational reality highlight the need of differentiated or even alternative methods of teaching and learning (Kyriakakis & Koletsou, 2011). The exploitation of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the teaching process creates a more productive and pleasant teaching

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environment and promotes new dimensions not only in the structural and organizational frame of the teaching process, but also in the teacher's new role (Terzieva et al., 2014; Mabrito & Medley, 2008). Besides, the typical and traditional way of teaching for many students and teachers has completely changed (Toki & Pange, 2013). Recent research data demonstrate the importance of ICT, the potential benefits in students' success, the cooperative opportunities and the innovative ideas in education at all levels (Watson, 1993; Beker & Ravitz, 2001; World Bank, 2003; United Nations, 2005; Assessment, 2006; Tezci, 2009; Toki et al., 2009; Chai et al., 2010; Mikropoulos & Natsis, 2011; Stavrou et al., 2014).

The implementation of ICTs in the classroom depends on the appropriate use of modern tech-based methodologies in an educational context and teachers' willingness and sufficiency (Terzieva et al., 2014). Although the educational benefits must be acquired through careful utilization and by well educated professional teachers in order to correspond to students' developmental learning level (Vosniadou, 2006). On the other hand, the technological equipment of schools continues to be lacking and we encounter many cases of teachers who deny to use technology in their teaching process either because they are, inadequately educated, technophobic or very traditional and they are not willing to make changes or to use alternative teaching methods (Kontopodi et al., 2014; Vosniadou, 2006; Watson, 2001).

2. Implementation of the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the Teaching Process

In the international references, the conceptual identification of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), and according to UNESCO, presuppose the meaning analysis of the two other terms, those of Information and Communication Technology (Anderson & Van Weert, 2002). First Skinner mentioned Technology of teaching and referred to the methodology of teaching that includes the preparation of teaching methods and techniques for the design, process and evaluation of teaching (Matsagouras & Koukounaras-Liagkis, 2014). The ICT concerns the design, implementation, evaluation, use and maintenance of information processing systems as well as computer hardware and software. Information technology is defined as the set of computer systems and technological applications in society.

On this basis, ICT is defined as the combination of information technology with other related technologies and especially with communications (Mikropoulos, 2006).

The implementation of ICT as attractive educational tools has been dynamically integrated and seems to work in a supportive way in a range of alternative pedagogical approaches and in the Religious education in Primary School as it promotes digital literacy of students to understand trends, values and rules of the newly formed Sociopolitical and educational reality (Apple, 2008). The use of ICT in Primary School is a useful teaching tool, an alternative cognitive tool for communication, exploration, comprehension, and denaturation of the curriculum.

The functionality of the new technology in the teaching process widens the dimensions of teaching, raises the students' interest, excites their imagination, creates self-reactive learning conditions and provides stimuli for reflection and dialogue in a stochastic and flexible way. Through technology, learning motivation is involved and the students' interest in the teaching subject is aroused (Valakas, 2006).

The teaching implementation and utilization of the new technology in the learning process is required to comply with the students' age and level while it should be distinguished by its interactive nature, in order to

motivate students to participate actively and respond to their relevant experiences (Institute of Multimedia Means, 2011).

The pictorial versions and, in particular, digital illustrations are not perceived as passive reflections, but as multisensory active promoters of the development of a more multi-level approach, exploitation of new knowledge (Squire, 2009, pp. 83–85), and attainment of visual literacy (Arnheim, 2007, pp. 383–409). The perception of the digital illustrations demand a process that requires the acquisition of “virtual literacy”, the development of interpretation skills of the symbolic meaning so that students become “visually literate”, and have the critical processing capacity of the image and the ability to decrypt the messages (Barry, 1997, p. 338; Kress & Leeuwen, 2001; Buckingham & Scanlon, 2003; Schroeder, 2002, pp. 160–172; Kapsalis, 2008, 250–252). Each image constitutes a “text” which the viewer is asked to read, understand and interpret (Arnheim, 2007, pp. 383–409). The digital image is undoubtedly a meaning construction strategy as beyond an artistic form it is also an important means of communication, in which a number of ideological and social practices are reflected (Papathanasopoulos, 2009). The multiple meanings of the projected image makes the recruitment process more complicated, because the digital image functions as both a reality reproducing means but also provides differentiated or even conflicting interpretations (Vryzas, 2005). The digital image’s message can be distinguished by its content and its tendency to orient directly to a particular interpretation of the perceptual process. The transmission speed, reception and analysis of the image message are multiple compared to the emerged message which is delivered in written or spoken language. The digital image has significant advantages over other visual teaching means as it captures a large number of invisible details, simplifies complicated concepts, presents relations and explains abstruse phenomena. In addition, the digital image enables the complete depiction of real situations in cases where direct contact with the real experiential situation is impossible. The digital image can display behaviors and relationships that can hardly be explained verbally so that students have the opportunity to observe and interpret them (Valakas, 2006).

Modern technological tools are valuable cognitive tools for the student and may change learning from a discipline and discomfort into a discovery and excitement process (Papert, 1993).

Therefore, the use of ICT in the teaching process becomes the mean that develops a mental relationship between this and its user in the process of searching the information and acquiring knowledge (Crock et al., 2010) with new ways of triggering thought and reflection (Raptis & Raptis, 2004).

The aim of this paper is to highlight the multisensory dynamics of the exploitation of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the teaching process, through the teacher’s differentiated role and the student’s communicative negotiation by developing data and utilizing the possibilities of new technologies.

3. Development of Social Skills by the Implementation of New Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in Religious Education

Nowadays school, in our country and all around the world, undertakes the role to introduce, inform and advise students for the religious tradition and principals. This religious tradition within its varieties is undoubtedly an extremely important cultural asset. The transformation of this educational material to a digestible and commonly acceptable pedagogical-teaching material involves the selection, presentation, processing and analysis in the teaching process considering pedagogical theories and students’ experience and interests (Perselis, 1998). It is important for the student to conquer all those skills that will enable him/her to seek for the alleged or not

message, and this is possible through the development of education in the following attitudes and skills (Nika, 2007): a) Critical Attitude to approach the message of the digital images, b) Extensive treatment, analysis and proper selection of appropriate information, c) Internal Search for the deeper meanings and significance of the information is an important source of knowledge and challenge of interest, d) Connection of the student's pre-existing knowledge and experience with the new knowledge, e) Investigation of validity and reliability of the information presented, f) Enlargement of intellectual horizons for acceptance of the pluralism of ideas and acquisition of self-esteem for personal choice and judgment.

The purpose of Religious education, according to the official curriculum, is to form independent and responsible citizens, by the knowledge it provides in the critical development of the students' religious consciousness, not only through the acquaintance of Christianity, but also by the familiarization of other religions around the world. Furthermore, aims to cultivate the students' morality and personality, to strengthen respect and coexistence despite the religious diversity. The new perspective on religious education applied to Primary School refers to Christianity's proposals for securing the good of cohesion and quality of life in the modern world, raising awareness, shaping the students' viewpoint and practicing them about the hyper-ethnic, hyper-national and universal character of the Christian message in the perception of the multicultural, multiracial and multireligious structure of modern societies and finally taking into consideration the need for inter-Christian and inter-religious communication (Yagazoglou, 2014). In particular, religious education in the 1st and 2nd grade of Greek Primary school is included in the Environmental education and mainly concerns religious events (Vagianos, 1989). As a separate lesson from the 3rd to the 6th grade, students experience Christianity as biblical history, as an Orthodox Christian tradition, as a cultural expression and may perceive the Christianity's history and its presence in our modern pluralistic and rapidly changing world (Yagazoglou, 2014).

The purpose of teaching religious education is to contribute: a) to the acquisition of knowledge about Orthodox Christian faith and tradition, b) to the understanding of Christian faith as a means of understanding the world and life, c) providing opportunities for students for critical treatment of stereotypes, assumptions, values, attitudes and related considerations, d) The promotion of Orthodox spirituality as an individual and collective experience (Markantonis, 1998). Therefore, the orthodox education from the Primary to the graduation must be for the child and the teenager an evolutionary path to the Theognosis (Portelanos, 1999).

The dynamic use of ICT in Religious education by using the appropriate educational software and by ensuring the appropriate conditions for working in groups develops social learning skills (Oikonomou, 2005, pp. 17–27). Social learning and formation of personality are two concepts that are interrelated and complementary (Cole & Cole, 2001), as social competence is used to show the desirable expected outcome of a child's development (Schaffer, 1996). It states the individual's ability to interact effectively with the environment, to achieve social goals, to engage in interpersonal relationships, to integrate into the group (Kyridis, 1996) and to develop the skills of acceptance, sympathy and empathy (Sakellariou, 2002). However, it is a participatory process where learning takes place into a cultural environment (Vygotsky, 1997), in which the things and the means that help in the discovery of knowledge are products of human history and culture (Skoura, 1994). The socio-cultural approach presupposes individual development as a prerequisite for progress from social to individual (Roggof, Mosier, Mistry & Gfncio, 1999). This achievement of individuality and psycho-mental maturity depends on the interactions with other members of society, adults and peers. Children do not discover knowledge, but they take it by their socio-cultural environment, and then they build mental processes by using them in their social interaction with others. Each form of interaction that is developed and built together offers a rich field of experience and

several opportunities for learning and teaching (Hoogsteder, Meier & Elbers, 1999). At the same time, the way someone works in a didactic, learning conciliation is a cultural catholic form that may depend on the environment, the goals of evolution and the nature of contact between children and adults (Faulkner & Woodhead, 1999). The implementation of ICT in the teaching process offers opportunities for many experiences that convey to the child feelings of self-esteem, self-confidence, externalization of emotions and skills that can be acquired through the active participation in the learning process by creating an environment that promotes motivation for discovery, experimentation, collaboration, communication and interaction (Mercer, 2000).

The implementation of ICT in the religious education aims at interactive learning with the students' active participation, taking into account their experiences, and stimulates the exploratory process of knowledge (Oikonomou, 2005, pp. 17–27). Furthermore, The transition from the traditional model of teaching to the student-focused modern alternative teaching approaches is favored. The use of ICT in the Religious education provides opportunities to represent concepts and procedures, opportunities to deepen the use of multiple representations of the same knowledge at different levels of description by practical use of the theoretical approaches (Phokus & Tsigakou, 2014).

The implementation of ICT to the Religious education aims to make learning more interesting and attractive to students and to contribute significantly to its updating as it is customary to belong to the “traditional” courses of the Greek educational system (Fitzgerald, 2000). It is possible to present the events and information related to the Religious lesson in a multiple way by alternately combining the text with sound and animated digital image. Through the use of ICT in the Religion lesson, the passive process of acquiring knowledge is eliminated and the active role of the learner in the learning process is emphasized. The teaching differs according to the students' special needs, preferences and talents, with personalized tasks that provide adequate feedback in a short period. The learning conditions become more qualitative and cooperative, while the learning map extends beyond the limited boundaries of the school environment and the teacher's knowledge (Moyle, 2012).

The use of ICTs in the Religious education with the teacher's guidance can make a significant contribution to the achievement of the lesson's teaching objectives. This is mainly due to the ability of the computer to: a) increase the “sensitization” of the tau events in the Religious education and to raise students' awareness of familiar to them matters, b) the ability to understand the event with regard to the deeper meaning and c) the ability to give feedback to the educational process through activities that stimulate the students and encourage them to co-operate (Solomonidou, 1999).

The teacher by organizing and preparing specific activities with the implementation of ICT in the religious education, may systematize, promote, stimulate and enhance the processes of social learning, in this way, social learning is cultivated by an indirect and natural way (Tzani & Kechagias, 2009). However, teaching and learning must take place in the appropriate learning environment and in well-formed relationship. The interactive relationship between teacher and students is formed in the context of cultural tradition, in specific environments (Mercer, 2000). In each educational process, teachers use strategies that cultivate and extend the acquisition of communicative and social skills and competencies - which have begun to develop in the family environment - and which contribute to the socialization and cognitive development of students. The greatest benefit for the student is that he/she is not a passive receiver of knowledge, as was in the teacher-centered model, but is activated, collaborates with his peers, judges, converses and develops synthetic abilities (Fragos, 1998, pp. 384–386).

4. Teaching Scenario for Developing Social Skills by the Implementation of New Information and Communication Technologies (ICT): An Example in Teaching the Lesson of Religious Education

Brief presentation of the scenario: The example that will be presented below aims at demonstrating the element of alternative teaching in the lesson of Religious Education in the elementary school by the implementation of New Information and Communication Technology (ICT). The particular scenario functions as an expansion of the Unit: “Saint Sophia: A marvel of art”, in Chapter IV of the module: “Creating a beautiful world” of the course of Religious Education for the Fifth class of primary School. We will use the educational software of the Pedagogical Institute for Religious Education, Microsoft Word, the Internet and other technological tools in the school laboratory. The teaching scenario was held in February 2017, in a Greek elementary school in Athens.

Title of the teaching scenario: Saint Sophia: A marvel of art

Cognitive areas involved: The cognitive subject is connected with the course of Modern Greek Language (literary texts, Bible study, writing, listening and speaking), Aesthetic Education (Music, Art) and Technology (ICT).

Class: 5th grade of elementary school

Number of students: Twenty-four (24) students took part in the teaching scenario that is presented below in the experimental class where activity theory in the framework of differentiated teaching is being used.

Organization of teaching: The organization of the class is a basic form of work in groups of 3–4 students. It is important the enactment of functions, roles and instructions. The number of members constituting a group depends on several factors. Some factors are the number of the students in the classroom, their age, the adequacy of the teaching tools, the degree of difficulty of the project and the available time (Hatzidimou & Anagnostopoulou, 2011, pp. 76–77; Kassotakis & Flouris, 2013, p. 503). Teaching students in small working groups can develop the students’ social skills. The organization and structure of the students’ groups are elements that will make them more stable, lasting and may develop the cooperation in class (Moumoulidou & Rekalidou, 2010, p. 90). The exchange of opinions in a small group strengthens reciprocal comprehension and team cohesion, encourages interpersonal learning, facilitates accountability and contributes to communication and collaboration skills (Matsagouras, 2008).

4.1 Means of Application for the Teaching Scenario

The materials used for the realization of the scenario:

- computers,
- worksheets,
- software from the Pedagogical Institute on Religion Education,
- the Internet,
- Microsoft Word,
- printed sources (student’s book, the Holy Bible).

4.2 Target of Teaching

Main target: For the students to understand the religious, cultural, architectural, historical and artistic value of the church of St Sophia, both for Greeks and for the whole Orthodox Christian world.

Other targets:

- To inform students about the background of the temple's construction and realize the difficulties based on the technical means and the possibilities of the time period.
- To penetrate as far as practicable, the basic architectural peculiarities of the construction, with special attention to details that made Saint Sophia's church, for eight centuries, the most important temple.
- To combine the reconstruction of St. Sophia with Emperor Justinian and architects Anthemios and Isidoros.
- To realize the major religious, architectural, cultural, emotional and historical value of this church and its history, for every Orthodox Christian today.
- To learn to cooperate and talk with reciprocity and respect to each other.
- To understand that the Religious Education can be understandable through enjoyable and creative activities with the appropriate educational equipment.
- To obtain higher forms of thinking, such as analysis, synthesis and understanding of important facts concerning Christianity.

Duration: 2 (two) teaching hours

4.3 Process of the Teaching Scenario

4.3.1 1st Two Hours' Teaching

Firstly the teacher announce the title of unit and then is recalled the previous knowledge about Byzantine art and the temples' construction. Then a historical line and an electronic historical map are presented in the Centennia software, in order to understand the space-time dimension of the historical period when the temple was built. Then a conceptual map that contains the important keywords and facts of unit is presented. The students work out the keywords that are presented and a discussion is followed.

Afterwards, the teacher reminds the students briefly of basic information for Word [file creation, opening, saving, closing the application, file opening, keyboard switch, basic formatting commands from the toolbar (font size, color, font, centered) image import, image position in the text (center, left, right)] and provides a first acquaintance with the means of the evaluation. Then all the students explore the content of the course from the installed educational software of the Pedagogic Institute for the lesson "Saint Sophia: A marvel of art". It is a system of teaching offering practical guidance (tutorials), multimedia content (includes generally given content, supporting specific use and allows differentiation in the teaching process). It concerns mainly low-level knowledge and skills developed within individual disciplines, suitable, however, for students of this age. The systems of guided teaching (Computer Support of Teaching) help students to approach a specific software application. By selecting this link, students have the opportunity to use the audiovisual with useful information related to Saint Sophia's temple. Then, the students follow the alternative activity: They use a browser for example Internet Explorer in order to find useful information from safe links. The teacher beforehand has checked the links, to ensure they are safe and correspond to the students' age and the experiences. Each team is asked to create a file on the desktop, in which selected images will be saved, developing thus the dexterity of searching for, finding and organizing data. Then the students can use the Google Earth application and browse through a virtual trip to the church of Saint Sophia in Istanbul.

4.3.2 2nd Two Hours' Teaching

In groups students prepare a presentation with images and videos through the PowerPoint application, of the architecture of Saint Sophia's temple. As an alternative application, the student groups use the application

kidspiration or Inspiration, in order to make the mapping of key words related to the temple of St. Sophia. Students can work on how to make short films on the religious, architectural, cultural, emotional and historical value of the church and its history, for every Orthodox Christian today, through the Movie Maker program. Alternatively students practice the use of simulation software (Microworlds Ex/Stagecast) and take part in activities related to the theme of their project.

Then the student groups work with WebQuest, which is a guided exploration activity, in which they take advantage of the Internet as a basic source of information, although often not the only source. It is a Multimedia learning scenario, where information constitutes the raw material for processing and building new knowledge.

Afterwards we continue with the evaluation of the module. This will be done:

a) by using the software Hot Potatoes that allows teachers to create interactive multiple choice questions, crossword puzzles, matching, sorting and gap-filling exercises. It produces the exercises in html format and is local or on the internet (web browser).

b) on Microsoft Word, where students, through the writing, try to formulate deeper messages of the lesson or even choose an image, other than those in the file and paste it into the worksheet.

As completion of the entire evaluation phase with this scenario, the following video is presented to the students and they are asked to make comments on the parameters sought in the virtual tour to assess the level of understanding of the basic concepts that emerged through the previous activities and correspond the aims and objectives of the teaching scenario¹.

5. Conclusion

The contribution of New Information and Communication Technologies in education seems to have a crucial role to the development of social learning skills, when teaching Religious lesson at Primary School. In order to become conscious of the ideology and values of this lesson that will lead to the promotion of cooperation, self-action, exploration of knowledge, problem solving, justification, creativity and innovation a lot of effort should be made. In this framework, the implementation of New Information and Communication Technology (ICT), not only as a supporter of traditional types of teaching and behavioral learning tactics but also as conveyor of procedural knowledge, team work and creative thought, must take place through well organized and designed teaching scenarios, which place the student at the center of the teaching process, interacting with the content of the subject, the teacher, the classmates and the technological means. The teachers' training, the exploitation of innovative pedagogical practices and the redefinition of the modern teachers' role are basic prerequisites for creative learning environments with the implementation of New Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in teaching the Religious lesson at Primary School.

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¹ <http://www.3dmekanlar.com/en/hagia-sophia.html>.

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