

# **LEARNING ORTHODOXY THROUGH THE INTERNET: FROM VIRTUAL COMMUNICATION TO A REAL HANDSHAKING WITH CYPRUS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In the Finnish public schools the Internet and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in general have been utilized for the purposes of Orthodox Religious Education (R.E) since 1998. Promoting the use of this new media for teaching and learning has happened through the OrtoWeb with its various projects. Nowadays the OrtoWeb can be considered as a national portal for Greek Orthodox Religious Education in Finland in the ICT based environment. The focus is to deliver teaching materials in a digital format, to offer a new method and pedagogical approach for teaching and to promote networking in Orthodox Religious Education among the teachers both nationally and later internationally. Locally the networking among the Orthodox religious teachers has started and orientated on teachers' content and pedagogical knowledge. Renewing teaching methods and learning by applying the possibilities of information technology and the Internet is emphasised. During the year 2001 new project dimension in R.E was taken dealing with Senior High School education over the Internet. The question is about inter orthodox contacts and learning about different Orthodox Churches via the net. This was supposed to be put into practice by producing information into a closed learning environment concerning the Orthodox Churches in Finland, Cyprus and Greece. This paper describes the working plan, the phases and, to some extend, the surprising result of this project.

## **KEYWORDS**

Orthodox religion education, ICT based teaching and learning methods, closed learning environments, inter Orthodox networking, religious and cultural encounter through the Internet, e-Learning, content orientated learning.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In Finland Religious Education is a compulsory subject for the pupils both in Primary and Secondary Schools (Lower and Upper). The lessons are taught in public schools according to pupil's denomination i.e. the Orthodox and Protestants have their own teachers, materials and classes. The Finnish-speaking Orthodox Church is autonomous and belongs to the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. The members of the Finnish speaking Greek Orthodox Church are members of a minority religion in Finland. Because of historical reasons, the members of this Church are spread out all over Finland making up 1% of the total Finnish population of about 5.5 million. This effects also the ways to organize and maintain R.E among the Orthodox children and youth, who are taught approximately by 300 teachers in small teaching groups (Aikonen 1997).

The world has become smaller and smaller because of the new medium in communication. This influences also the fact that this new situation feeds the curiosity to learn about different countries and cultures. It is in order to face the multiculturalism in the unified Europe, it is necessary to join to the interaction between the nations. To achieve this objective one needs to deal with this kind of matters in real or virtual situations.

This objective also can be located to concern the churches and religions. Connecting the aim (learning about different Orthodox cultures and churches) and the means (the Internet) was a good starting point, and also a new way, to learn about other Orthodox churches and about their lives among young parish members. That is why in the project called Ort+Edu (1999-2001), in its latest stage, the emphasis was placed on inter Orthodox relations. Because of the previous collaboration and contacts with Greek speaking Orthodox countries, it was quite natural to start this part of Ort+Edu project with Greece and Cyprus.

### **OrtoWeb as a framework for inter Orthodox relationships in R.E**

In Finland the OrtoWeb thru its projects, like Ort+Edu, has become as a national portal for R.E in the Internet (to learn more look Aikonen, R. 2001. OrtoWeb - eBased Learning Environment over Internet for Orthodox Religion Education, In proceedings of Implementing CALL in EFL: Living Up To Expectations” in University of Cyprus on May 5 & 6, 2001. Cyprus.). Because there is also included a learning environment into OrtoWeb, it is based on theories of experiential and constructive learning and the constructive way of understanding information.

On the background there are some theological aspects, too. According to the tradition of the Orthodox Church, the ways to understand and to get knowledge (information) are based on the relationship with other church members. In the Church there are no individuals: the Church is the sum of parish members. Further more, Religious Education is not basically only a question of just providing or getting information. It is a question of “living information”. To the teacher this means bringing information to the practical level and living according to the information that he/she shares with the pupils. That is formation and it always needs a human touch in spite of the help of the technology in education. Adapting the Orthodox view of education, “taste and see” (see Schmemmann 1974) to the Internet is quite difficult, because there is a lack of dimensions, interactivity and emotional life in its whole range. It does not make very big sense to start “to preach orthodoxy” in the virtual environment. Who are your listeners? So, for a theologian it is not so big a surprise, if ICT in Religious Education does not pay itself as it perhaps does according to the advocates of the business world. This is because the Orthodox view of Christian education differs from the learning and teaching theories.

In spite of all these sceptical thoughts presented above there is no absolute reason to abandon or avoid the Internet in the R.E. The good use of the Internet connects people and is to share something common. At its best the www-material supports a deeper understanding of the same substance and paves the way for wider and mutual understanding concerning the Religious teaching and Religious life, and the situation of the Church in different kind of societies (minority-majority position of the Orthodoxy).

By using the Internet we can establish, to some extent, a virtual community to support the Orthodox identity both locally and internationally. At least for the children in a minority religion position it gives support for their Orthodox identity and to find out that there are also other schoolboys and girls of same kind. It can be said, that especially for purposes of the R.E in the rural areas and the countries of long distances (like Finland), it can be explained the efforts to utilize the Internet.

### **Teaching in networks and networks in teaching as a basis for Inter Orthodox project**

Teaching in networks and networks in teaching are two different traditions. The goals, starting points, teaching plans and choice of technology for them are different. The role of the teacher and the learner are also different in these two ways of learning.

Networks in teaching are based on the idea that the teacher utilises the network services to diversify his/her work towards multiform teaching. The nets are used as teaching aids. The network services used in teaching can deal with distributing information or communication. Network communication usually means sending e-mail messages with attachments, voice mail, text-based discussion (ICR) or pictures in video or other formats. Because of the www, the Internet is the most popular of the available information services. Communication in this environment has many benefits. The information can easily be revised, stored and produced compared to the paper versions.

Teaching in networks can be planned so that new learning material can be produced from the information located in the nets. Students can obtain information independently or they can produce information for the net (i.e. own www-pages). When using the nets in this way a teacher always has to remember that the computer-based learning environment itself is not the absolute value. He/she also has to take into account the functional insecurity when using nets in teaching.

Teaching in the networks takes place through the nets. So the nets are only an instrument for learning. Teachers and students are communicating through the nets, and the learning material can only be located in a server in a digital format. In this case we can speak about computer-based learning or distance learning (virtual school or university, telematic learning centre etc.). In the www –based environments the information itself is emphasised and the teaching can be done via the Internet and tutoring by e-mail. It is an easy way to find, produce and move information. One of its weaknesses is the fact that different environments usually do not support each other functionally and the problem concerning the connections through the net is still there.

### The substance-orientated IT use as a base for OrtoWeb

During the developing process attention (see picture 1) has to be paid, almost at the same time, to different kind of developing phases and topics. As a professional the teacher him/herself normally knows the substance very well. He/she knows what should be taught in the classroom and, after a training period in producing the IT-based contents, he/she also has an idea of what is worth of doing in the new way and what should be dealt with in a traditional way. In content production a decision on software solutions has to be made in the very beginning. This has to be done, for example, in order to avoid double work (re-editions etc.) caused by changing from one program to another. Also the main media solutions (text, video, sound etc.) should be decided at the beginning.

The teacher’s pedagogical knowledge, for example, refers to the methods which he/she has used in his/her frontal teaching. The teacher’s new challenge is to develop his/her old methods in IT-environments by having a continuous dialogue with the developers of technical environments. Their duty is also to decide on appropriate workgroups, on server and managing programs, and to take care of servers and their administration. It is obvious that this is a very important link between IT-teaching contents and their daily use in the classrooms. The administrator is a very “popular person”, for example in the OrtoWeb, where there is also a closed environment and usernames and passwords are needed for different study groups.

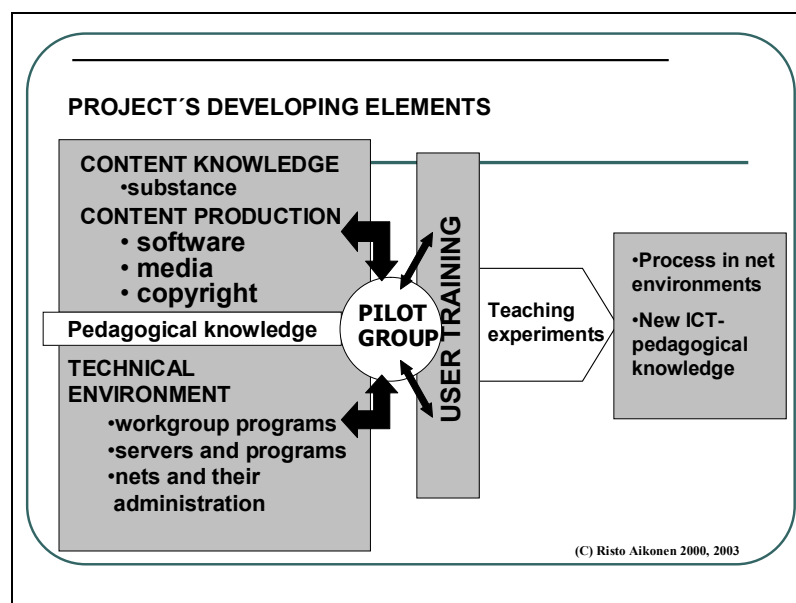


Figure 1. The different areas in the development model of the project

When all this has been achieved, it is time for the pilot group ( in this case primary and secondary high school teachers) to have also training in how to use IT- based learning environment in education, so that they can put into practise their own teaching experiments in their own teaching groups. During the experiments the piloting teachers get experiences of how the net serves their teaching and its aims and, consequently, as an output, the project gets new IT- pedagogical knowledge. It has to be taken into account that even though the model seems to be linear, in fact there is a continuous interaction between the different development areas. In the model some areas of Shulman's (1986) theory of teachers' content knowledge categories are adapted.

### **New dimensions in 2001**

Locally the network environment (OrtoWeb) has been in effective use in primary schools (classes 1 to 6) since autumn 1999, in senior high schools since autumn 2000. In 2001 a new dimension, dealing with senior high school education on the Internet with a study group from abroad, was added to the project.

Through the development stages and experiences described above, the project took a leap towards inter Orthodox use. The basic goal, described above, was to have as partners some senior high schools both from Greece and Cyprus. The contacts via the network were provided in a closed learning environment for teachers and pupils. In this sense, into the OrtoWeb there was a purpose to establish a bilateral relationship between the teachers (Finnish and Greek teacher, Finnish and Cypriot teacher) with the purpose of opening later a triangle-based working environment.

The contacts towards this kind of efforts were made during a teaching visit to Cyprus in spring 2000. Therefore, it was quite obvious to start working for the Religious Education (R.E) and to enlarge the use of the Internet in R.E with Cypriot colleagues. In Cyprus the OrtoWeb project was launched in the autumn of 2000 and it remained in operation until the end of 2001. The project started with the Greeks in the sprig of 2001 when, in Athens the writer of this article, after email correspondence, met a theologian who was keen on utilising ICT with his own senior high school class. Unfortunately, this co-work that started very enthusiastically, did not last longer than the first steps because of the other duties of that teacher. His substitute was not that much interested in continuing the co-operation and, so the project was continued with partners from Cyprus only.

Why were Greece and Cyprus chosen? The answer is because of those old and traditional regions of Orthodoxy (the heritage of Eastern Christianity and Byzantium). Both Greece and Cyprus are Orthodox countries where there is a long tradition of the R.E in the national education system. This means that the (Orthodox) R.E is a compulsory school subject with its curriculum, materials and methods as it is also in Finland.

### **The learning environment ThULE and working with it**

This co-operative work was located in a closed (safe) learning environment (L.E.) - ThULE with user-id and password requirements in ORT+EDU2001E. In this bilateral context the teachers between themselves decided on a topic or topics to be covered, made the schedule for the tasks, delivered these tasks to their classes and started email correspondence. Teachers decided, as their first topic, to tell each other about their local parishes. (Have a look at the www-site to see the page of the Finnish Orthodox Churches at <http://www.imlemesos.org/paidagogiko/filandia/filandia.htm>) During the year 2001 the project groups were put emphasis on content production (Cyprus, Finland) and testing the closed environment in teaching (Finland).

The learning strategy was based on the main theme and the sub-themes (2-4) chosen by the teachers combined with questions, learning tasks and guided discussions in the net environment (see picture 2). In the first phase of this strategy each class worked locally under the leadership of their teacher. Then they put their results (for example a text, pictures, voice or video clips) to the closed learning environment and evaluated their results between themselves. In the second phase they were supposed to

invite their fellow class from the foreign country to learn about the same topic in a different cultural context.

The stated strategy suggested that next, after reviewing the material, they should start also the discussion about the topics in the discussion area. They could use the chat if they had decided to do so, which usually requires an agreement on the meeting time. The teacher's duty was more or less to "help" the discussion by putting some topics beforehand to the discussion area, just to be sure to get some inputs in the area.

Mostly the environment was used in an asynchronous way (materials sharing, text based discussions). There was also a good possibility for a synchronous use, because there is no time difference between the countries. The teachers had to decide only on the "meeting hour" for this kind of learning activity and communication. It has to be noticed that this network environment is not supposed to cover all the lessons or all the lesson contents. The idea is to concentrate on a quite limited number of topics and, instead of quantity, the focus is on the quality of learning.

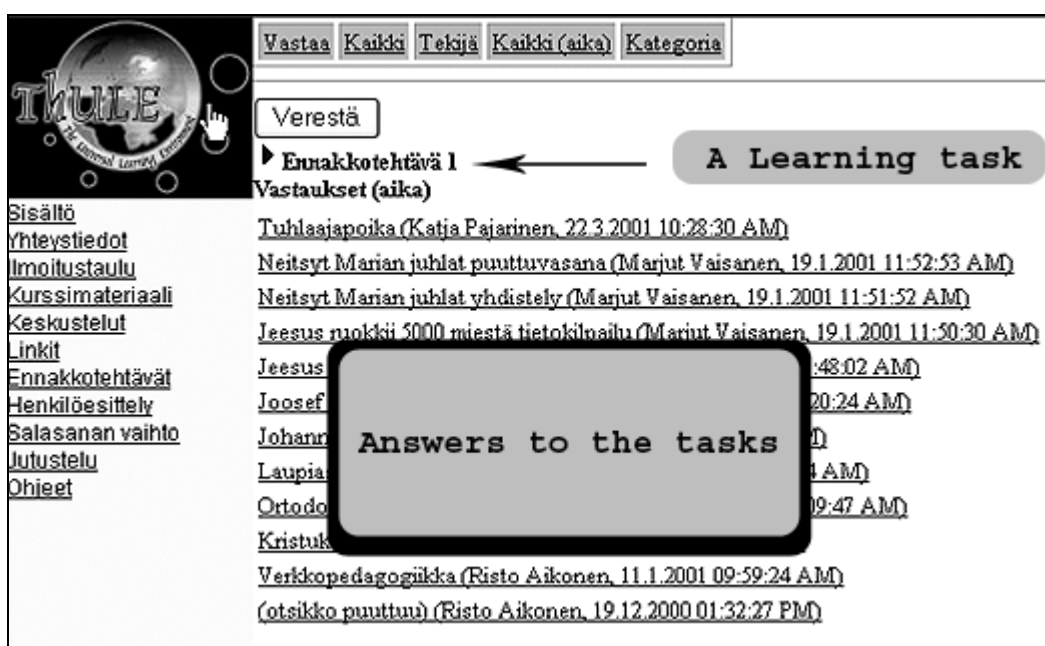


Figure2. A learning task and its answers in the closed environment

This all does not happen just by snapping the fingers. Both teachers and pupils should be trained to use this environment (techniques and the philosophy of using the Internet for learning), which actually happened with the partners from Cyprus and Greece among the teachers. Only in Finland also the pupils were trained, to some extent, in materials production and use in this environment. There were no possibilities for this training in Cyprus where most of this cooperation was carried out by a teacher herself and her colleagues.

As for the opportunities of using this learning environment, it is worth asking the question: Should the work be done only at school? At least in the future and under good net connections, the teacher could give the pupils learning tasks for home. Even though learning period in this case in the net is not mentioned to have lasted for more than 4 to 6 lessons, the tasks and the time for doing them should be in balance. A synchronous meeting at least once or twice during the learning period (for example via net meeting, videoconference or chat) is a very good way of motivating learning groups to give their best in quite a rare learning situation. Because of administrative reasons, in a case with a great number of pupils, it is perhaps reasonable to limit the use of this L.E to bilateral relations. However, there was readiness to work in a triangle Finland-Greece-Cyprus in this project.

### **The outcomes - from virtual communication to a real handshaking!**

The project with its goals and working strategy has been described above. In this chapter the focus is on outcomes and evaluation. First, the unpleasant findings have to be discussed because there were several obstacles to achieving the basic goals. According to the philosophy of qualitative research, all these results and implications deal with this particular project, consequently, they cannot be generalized to all similar ICT efforts in these countries and in this school subject.

First of all, it seemed so that this phenomenon, teaching and learning through the networks, is a quite new one in Greek and Cypriot learning cultures, in general and especially in Religious Education. In this school subject the main teaching methods in Cyprus are more or less based on frontal teaching, on text books and often on learning by heart rather than on experiential learning. So, above all, it took time to take the first steps towards this kind of teaching method. In Greece the network infrastructure in schools is at a higher level than in Cyprus, but with the partner school the main obstacle was the change of the key person. The story was quite a short one with the Greeks. The following findings and implications relate only to the project with the Cypriots.

The infrastructure of the school networks in Cyprus could not serve the method of working on the Internet in an optimal way. The base connections of the schools are at ISDN level while the LAN or xDSL are quite rare with the exception of the university environment. There is a shortage of computers for the use of teachers and pupils during their classes. Perhaps this was one reason for that, that after all from Cyprus there was no school class involved in this project (workshops were done only in Finland in two schools in Helsinki and Kuopio).

As already mentioned, the learning culture is perhaps not ready for this type of teaching and learning in R. E., due to infrastructure and the inadequate ICT skills of the Religious teachers. Further, the in-service training of ICT in education has started quite recently. Teachers themselves are perhaps motivated, but the (local) school authorities do not sufficiently support this kind of efforts. At the beginning of the project there was a learning period for both sides in how to start and to continue the project, in how and when to communicate (use of email) etc. At the beginning of the project (Autumn 2001) a Religion teacher from Finland visited her colleague in Cyprus. After fixing the ways of communication and other related matters the project with its limitations went along fine between the partners.

### **Is the net for R.E?**

The target of OrtoWeb is not to “wire” Orthodox religion education neither in Finland nor elsewhere. When we speak about “wiring” the R.E, we mean that all the learning contents, learning experiences and teaching above all is “downloadable”. That would be impossible because of the more or less unsuitable pedagogical approach and most of all, there is a huge amount of work.

According to Dr. Anton C. Vrame from the Holy Cross Academy (Brooklyn, Mass.) there is a great danger in IT-based religion education that only models of religious behaviour and virtual reality are transmitted and, in fact, the relationships to the real life is cut off. Therefore, an ICT producer or a planner of Religious Education always has to keep in mind how to connect the contents to the living Christian environment.

At least at first stage of developing ICT environments for Religious Education the focus should be on the contents that are related to knowledge or on showing virtually things which take place also in the real world (for example streaming video/voice material). These contents are like grains of mustard seed, to which and with which to reform the information concerning the Orthodox way of living. Through the knowledge or streaming material we can catch up also our emotions. We agree or disagree with the information; we might join in to sing a song or follow the worship from a new perspective: Do I miss something when following the ceremony without participating in it at a certain time and in a certain place? Is there an interface for theology and technology?

For the moment it is clear that this part of OrtoWeb has already changed the way of thinking in the use of different teaching methods. There can be assumed that this concerns both Finland and perhaps also Cyprus in terms of information and communication technology in the R.E. It might lead on to revising work, to some extent, of the contents of the in-service training programs for Religious Education teachers. It has also raised the need to continue this kind of efforts in the field of R.E.

During this project it has been shown that religious and cultural encounters through the Internet are possible. This supports a deeper understanding of the same substance and paves the way for wider and mutual understanding concerning the Religious teaching, education and life, and the situation of the Church in different kind of societies (minority-majority position of the Orthodoxy). But most of all this was the best result: Instead of having dozens and dozens of emails during the year 2001 it was very pleasant to host almost thirty theologians and their family members from Cyprus in June 2002 in Finland. Proudly this can be expressed “from virtual communication to a real handshaking”.

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