

# Life Behind the Wall: Palestinian Students Online

Doug Hart

**When I began teaching** at the Ramallah Friends High School in the West Bank, about eight miles from Jerusalem, my students did not hide their utter dislike for reading, writing, or anything else that related to English class. I was determined to change things around, and I knew that the only way to do this would be to make the process relevant and beneficial to them. My students, whose first language is Arabic, needed to know in a practical way why they should read, speak, and write English. The fact that they were in an elite English-speaking school that aimed to prepare them for global work and citizenship wasn't enough to motivate my students.

Within a month into the school year, and after a fair amount of classroom brainstorming, my students and I decided to transform our English classes into crucibles of real-world engagement. Through our classroom discussions, it dawned on my students that an organized Palestinian youth presence was completely lacking on the World Wide Web. This realization would prove cathartic. Indeed, it was with this awareness that my students found a reason for English class. In October 2005, they decided to develop the first Palestinian online youth magazine.

From the beginning, the idea of publishing their own magazine made sense to my students. They felt isolated, misunderstood, and alone on the world stage, and believed a Palestinian youth "e-zine" was needed because teenagers in other countries had no idea what life was like for them. They were also convinced that their homeland, one of the world's most chronic hotspots, needed at least one publication giving Palestinian teens a voice. Who would have predicted that that voice would be in English?

From October 2005 through March 2006, my students built the online magazine from the ground up, within their English classes. During numerous class

periods and after-school gatherings, they determined the e-zine name and section topics, and began to write one assigned essay after another, covering topics ranging from lifestyle and culture, to domestic and international politics. My students told me that they wrote more during the second and third quarter of last year than they had written the entire preceding year in English class. The students were driven and hopeful that their work would result in greater global understanding of them and their people. Finally, after more than six months of planning, in April of 2006, they launched the inaugural edition of their teen e-zine, *Behind The Wall*.

Neither I, nor my students, had the know-how or time to develop a decent website. So, I enlisted the help of my brother-in-law, Paul Owen, who teaches computer classes at Sparta High School in Michigan. His students, along with David Marker, a professional computer programmer, constructed the *Behind The Wall* website.

The intent of *Behind The Wall* is to provide a platform for my Palestinian students to speak honestly and openly about their opinions and experiences. Almost nothing is off limits (exceptions include sexually explicit content, for example).

Given the nature of this free forum, my students' last names are withheld to protect them from possible harassment for their views from either Palestinian or Israeli extremists and bullies.

In the inaugural April edition, my students wrote about everything from Hamas and religion, to good Palestinian food (including a favorite recipe for hummus), fashion, and life in general. One student wrote,

It's not easy to live here for my parents or me, because they can't bring home stuff easily, and there are too many checkpoints on the way. And also the work here is not good like before; it's hard to find a job here. That's why my dad went to America to work.

In our September 2006 issue, my students not only shared some unflattering views of President Bush and his government, but they also described in detail what life in Ramallah is like. Students conducted a survey, asking their classmates the following question,

As you walk down the main street of Ramallah, what is most likely to grab your attention? (a) The traffic policeman (b) Men without jobs, flirting with women passing by (c) Shouting salesmen trying to attract customers (d) The posters of martyrs on every wall or sign.

Of the 74 students surveyed, 35 selected (b); 18 selected (d); 13 chose (c); and eight chose (a).



Tenth grade Ramallah Friends School students draft stories for their online magazine.

In our November issue, my students wrote extensively about Palestinian family experiences and values.

Given the variety and divergent views, this e-zine does not advocate any specific political, religious, or cultural agenda. It merely offers a transparent window into the hearts and minds of the students. They believe this approach represents the only solid foundation for genuine understanding of them. Therefore, I refrain from editing their conveyed attitudes and ideas. Everything on *Behind The Wall* is straight from my students' keyboards.

Some of those students advocate Palestinian/ Israeli co-existence, a two-state solution, and believe change must be accomplished through peaceful means; others support Hamas, refuse to recognize the State of Israel, and embrace violence as a legitimate means for ending the occupation. Both types of students speak with passion, from Palestinian perspectives that contrast with the pro-Israeli perspectives with which Americans are more likely to be familiar. They may very well offend a *Behind The Wall* reader, depending on that given reader's point of view. Whatever the case, it appears

that "candid" is just what readers want. Since the mid-April unveiling, the e-zine has been viewed by more than 25,000 people worldwide. Not bad for a class project, is it?

### The Nuts and Bolts of Creating an E-Zine

Putting together an online publication is indeed an outrageous amount of work for one facilitating teacher. It takes passion, resolve, and lots of time. Here are some suggestions drawn from the detailed experiences of my students and myself in putting this web platform together:

1. *Make a firm commitment of time.* To develop a real, serial publication, you need to be able to stick with it for an entire school year. No sooner were our April and September 2006 editions behind us, than we were in the throes of putting the November issue together, with the editions for February, April, and June fast approaching.
2. *Line up technical support.* You need to recognize your limitations and seek help from others. We relied heavily upon

a professional computer programmer and a high school computer class for web construction, trouble-shooting, and maintenance. Fortunately, David Marker, our web technician, and Paul Owen, the computer teacher, worked on our first and second editions for free. For other teachers considering a similar project, I recommend seeking help from the school's computer teachers or the IT department.

3. *Get support from your school.* In order to create a platform for students to speak candidly, it helps to have the school leadership's backing. My students are fortunate to be in a Quaker, American-owned and operated private school that values the First Amendment, and promotes free and unfettered speech. Also, my students come from homes with parents who understand the value of honest global interaction. As a result, *Behind The Wall* has not been co-opted or pressured by outside forces.

4. *Use peer editors.* I suggest that teachers should not rely exclusively on themselves for editing. My teens received substantial editing help from outside the school. Along with a United States teacher, Linda VanLaan, who volunteered as our chief editor, we had more than 100 students from five Michigan English classrooms and one Wisconsin classroom serve as peer editors. They reviewed our article drafts and provided feedback on the quality of writing, assisting with grammar, punctuation, capitalization, and overall writing style. Thanks to the facilitation of their English teachers, our peer editors received class credit for their labor.

Credit was not the only benefit for peer editors. We soon added peer reviewers from around the world. Here's what a peer editor from London had to say a few months ago:

Doing this project has improved our proofreading skills. After we finished this project, we found that our grammar had improved when we were doing our own written work. We already knew that

Ramallah Friends school students collaborate on content for their e-zine in English class.



Doug Hart

English was a hard language to learn, but now we realise why it is so hard: there are so many small rules that you need to remember, in punctuation, sentence structure, grammar, spelling, typography.

The academic benefit from the peer editing process was also enormous in my English classrooms. Based on editor recommendations, my students made significant changes to their drafts, and, as a result, learned more about good grammar and punctuation, while producing better work. The peer editing process was so valuable last year that I expanded this work to eight schools worldwide for our November issue. I contacted schools and teachers to participate in peer editing simply through cold calls and sending out inquiring spam-like emails. Last fall, I spent hundreds of hours writing introductory emails and making phone calls.

5. *Make the students responsible and accountable.* While teachers must always remain involved in the administration

of a school-related e-zine, these types of enterprises must ultimately be owned by the students. The e-zine recently took a major step forward with the establishment of a new *Behind The Wall* teen editorial board. Thirteen Friends School 11th graders, who were among the initiators of this project last school year, are now taking a leadership role in editorial decision-making. By early spring, this youth board will be calling most of the major shots on e-zine content, making this publication almost entirely student directed. In addition to this, a student “Marketing and Promotions Committee” was recently created, consisting exclusively of 10th and 11th graders. It is now *their* responsibility to get the word out about their e-zine.

Let me extend this notion of “teen responsibility” to another critical piece of this e-zine project: content accountability. All *Behind The Wall* student writers have willingly submitted themselves to an international peer review process. Since September of this school year, students from over 20 classrooms

all over the world have been serving as peer reviewers. They read and reacted to my students’ articles, expanding on ideas, making comparisons, and even writing dissenting opinions from time to time. Much of their work—regardless of how critical—has already been published. For instance, the November issue of *Behind The Wall* includes student reviews from Michigan, Wisconsin, California, Connecticut, Oregon, Poland, Sweden, Turkey, Canada, Brazil, and Australia. My hope is to soon include a classroom from the State of Israel as well.

### Conclusion

The power of this student-to-student global interaction should not be underestimated. The peer review system described here has become possible only because of the emergence of the internet, which allows rapid reviews of posted writing and quick interaction between students in different parts of the world. The experience of my class suggests that this is an area in which the internet offers enormous potential

that is currently underutilized by educational institutions worldwide. Having peer reviewers can be a great help for students learning languages; and this applies not only to students learning English, like my students in Ramallah, who benefit from assistance from native speakers, but also to American students learning foreign languages, whose schools can connect them to speakers of those languages abroad.

My teens are learning a lot from their peers around the world, and vice-versa. The peer review process has enabled substantive dialogue on numerous cultural and political issues. I have heard numerous comments from my students about how much they are learning about the world's perception of them, and how they are similar to and different from youth in other countries. I also receive emails regularly from international teachers and students about how the web platform is making them more aware of this region of the world. One recent email from a teacher said this:

My students learned an enormous amount from your *Behind The Wall* writers. They now know that while your students may not like the United States government, they do generally like American people. More importantly, they now understand why your students distinguish between the two.

My final point brings us back to our classrooms. My advice is simple: integrate what you do with your curricula. In my class, peer reviews are used for reading comprehensions, and writing assignments and speeches provide e-zine content. I would say that about 80 percent of everything we write in English class is now somehow tied to *Behind The Wall*. The result: My students are more motivated, better at writing, and deeply aware of their labor's significance in English class.

Near the close of last school year, a female, 10th grade student gave a speech

in front of our class. Her topic was *Behind The Wall*:

This year I learned two things: First, I can make a real difference in this world. Second, English class can be fun. I will never forget this opportunity to help my beloved country—Palestine.

When I compare my students' work now with their work at the beginning of the school year, it is clear that, not only did their grammar and punctuation improve, but their essays have become more efficient and logically organized, easier to read and understand, and more perceptive and nuanced. Their confidence in being able to effectively communicate has also skyrocketed. 🌟

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