

Case Study – Community Cohesion 'Facing History and Ourselves' at Skinners' Company's School

2010

By Rebecca Warren, Head of Humanities at Skinners' Company's School for Girls, Hackney, and Michael McIntyre, UK Programme Coordinator, Facing History and Ourselves.

Facing History and Ourselves is an international non profit educational and professional development organisation that has been in existence for over 30 years. Founded in Boston Massachusetts, it has offices in the USA, Canada and England, and has partnerships in Northern Ireland, Rwanda and South Africa. Facing History's mission is to engage students of diverse backgrounds in an examination of racism, prejudice and anti-Semitism in order to promote the development of a more humane and informed citizenry. By studying the historical development of the Holocaust and other examples of genocide and mass violence, students make the essential connection between history and the moral choices they confront in their own lives. The organisation offers professional development opportunities, access to a wide range of resources and extensive follow up support. This is an approach to community cohesion which is finding resonance in more and more schools both in London and in other parts of England.

Facing History has a pedagogical approach based on a course of study known as the Scope and Sequence. This is a journey that travels from examining issues of identity towards looking at problems of membership and belonging in various kinds of society, past and present. It then explores a case history in depth, usually the Holocaust and the events leading to it, with an emphasis on the choices people made and why they made them, and a realisation that the course of history was not inevitable. After that, the journey moves to issues of judgement, memory and legacy. Here it looks at how societies have emerged out of periods of mass violence and genocide. Finally there is Choosing to Participate, a module in which practical examples of how people contribute to fighting injustice and creating civil society are considered, and where students might create their own projects and develop their thinking about civic action. This allows students to make sense of how they can act, engage and take responsibility for making their world a better place.

Facing History uses interactive methodology to engage students with the often difficult and emotive subject matter. For this reason it puts a great store on teacher training, and offers in depth workshops and five day summer seminars to help teachers understand the content and pedagogy. Its commitment to teachers is that once they have completed the training the organisation will offer on going support for as long as the teacher wants it.

Rebecca Warren, Head of Humanities at Skinners' Company's School for Girls, reflects below on the experience of working with Facing History on a project in her school.

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Skinners' Company's School for Girls has been working with Facing History for three years now. I and three other teachers from the school met with Michael McIntyre, the UK Programme Coordinator, for a series of after school workshops that took them through the Scope and Sequence and introduced them to the pedagogies and approaches that Facing History use. As humanities teachers, scepticism about the different organisations that purport to aid teachers in the classroom is par for the course, however they were completely won over by several factors from Facing History. First, the sound academic source base that underpins all of their resources and methodology. Secondly, their approach to engaging students in trying to understand some of the hardest topics to teach – genocide, mass violence and Holocaust.

The outcome of the workshops was that the teachers chose to put on a two day workshop for all of year 9. The four teachers worked together rotating different classes to go through the Scope and Sequence, using the Holocaust and the Rwandan genocide as historical case studies. The feedback from students was very positive and many students, two years later still talk about how the workshops affected them. The history teacher and I then decided to attend the week long seminar that Facing History offers in the summer. They joined teachers from Rwanda, Israel, Palestine, Northern Ireland, South Africa and the UK to get an in-depth understanding into how to teach the Facing History materials. Not only was it excellent teacher training and wonderful to have such varied insights from people of all faiths and different country experiences, but having a space as individuals and teachers to explore their own views, prejudices, bias and to know that it is OK to have differing opinions. Facing History created a safe space and showed how to recreate this to allow students to explore. As one colleague said to me,

'Teachers have such a big responsibility yet often little time to explore and discuss difficult issues in a personal way. How can we expect students to enter into a safe space and explore these difficult issues if we haven't done the same?'

After this training my colleague and I developed a 12 week programme with four lessons a week that we taught to our Year 9 cohort. They were then able to go into much more depth as we followed the whole Holocaust and Human Behaviour teaching module. The history teacher had taught the Holocaust before, but said that this was the first time that the students as a whole had started engaging and understanding in a way that did the subject matter justice. The biggest revelation to students was the persecution of Jewish people throughout the last 2000 years and the impact this might have on people today. Questions and interest, rather than suspicion and prejudice about the large

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Hasidic Jewish community that the school is located in were generated and understanding was gained.

It is quite hard to describe what the magic ingredient to Facing History teaching is. A number of factors that make it successful: Firstly it is the lack of 'dumbing down' – sources, difficult information etc, are not presented in a simplified manner, but teaching techniques and approach allow students to tackle key academic materials. This gives students a real sense of achievement and they feel respected.

Secondly it is the teaching techniques themselves. Some of them were familiar to me, some not, but it gives you an armoury of solid pedagogy to draw from. An example of just one very simple exercise is when a text/picture/source is presented, you go through the process of **Text to Self** (e.g. this reminds me of a time when...), **Text to Text** (this is where students make connections with other texts/ideas/sources they have studied and build up their conceptual learning, linking and contrasting with other academic sources) and **Text to World** (students connect the ideas to things occurring in the world today).

Thirdly, it is the personal touch. The main Facing History course is called Holocaust and Human Behaviour – and it is this Human Behaviour part that really makes students reflect on themselves, their own society, and the very nature of being human. Tough moral questions are asked – and not necessarily answered. Space is given to think about the roles and responsibilities of the perpetrators, the bystanders, the victims and the complex social conditions that created such appalling acts of mass violence.

Fourthly – the materials, the support and the training is second and according to citizenship teacher Rebecca second to none that she has experienced in her years of teaching.

In the humanities department at Skinners' we are now integrating Facing History modules and general approach in creating their integrated humanities curriculum. The modules we are planning to teach are the 'Identity and Belonging' unit as part of our introduction into the school and the local area. We are going to teach 'Choices in Little Rock', about the civil rights movement in the US and schools de-segregation. We will also do 'Decision Making in Times of Injustice', a unit designed for younger students with strong elements of critical thinking, and a unit on South Africa where we will communicate with students studying Facing History units there with the teachers I met during the Facing History Summer Seminar. And of course, later on in Key Stage 3, 'Holocaust and Human Behaviour'.

So what is the impact on our students? Better conceptual understanding; better linking of themes, ideas and concepts between case studies and the past and present.; better critical thinking skills;

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better questioning about the world and what goes on in it. But most importantly, students become more engaged in their own communities and apply the knowledge they learn to their own lives.

Facing History has recently received results from a major independent evaluation of its work in the USA which shows that teachers feel the professional development they get from Facing History leaves more equipped to provide the education their students need than other training they have had. Research also shows that when teachers feel confident and good about their work this has a major effect on the performance of their students. The work at Skinners' is just one example of how in depth training can enhance the teaching skills and imagination of a group of teachers and transform the way they look at the curriculum and the purposes of teaching. Information about the evaluations, training courses and materials Facing History offers can be found at www.facinghsitory.org Or else contact the authors of this article for further information