



Student Conference

Exploring Controversial Issues and Challenging Stereotypes

Liverpool Hope University and Childwall Synagogue
Wednesday 2nd Nov 2011

Introduction

This day conference is part of a process in which PGCE RE and Performing Arts trainee teachers at Liverpool Hope University, under the leadership of Joy Schmack with support from colleagues, have been work together to develop skills and gain confidence in dealing with contentious areas. The students only began their PGCE courses in the third week of September and up until this point have only had limited classroom experience. In readiness for the conference, it was clear that the students had done a great deal of preparation, including completing a SEQ and reading and using materials from the Gateway documents.

As a follow up, the trainee teachers will each write a full evaluation showing development and impact and write a Masters level Assignment on teaching contentious issues.

The conference

The conference brought together Year 9 and 10 students from 5 schools. Students experienced 4 interactive workshops, three led by the trainee teachers and the fourth by a member of the Jewish community from Childwall Synagogue. Some schools began at Liverpool Hope and the others at the synagogue, with the changeover of venues happening in the lunch break.

At Liverpool Hope, the conference began with a short address from Alastair Ross, REsilience Project Manager, who explained the purpose of the day, how important it is to listen, be open minded and not to pre-judge on limited evidence. Issues which would be explored during the day were: conflict and resolution, challenging stereotypes and identity.

Students were then divided into workshop groups and participated in a series of activities which explored one of the issues. At the beginning of each workshop the trainees outlined expectations and the ground rules for listening and respect for each other.



REsilience Project Manager introduces the day at Liverpool Hope University

Workshops

Conflict

In the conflict workshop, students looked at four different types of conflict and possible ways to resolve them: relationship, inner, political and religious. For each conflict investigated, there were various activities for example: discussion, role play, decision making, 'conscience alley', responding to questions, fictitious, but controversial newspaper headlines and freeze frames. There was also a short video to watch.



Freeze frames and controversial newspaper headlines in the conflict workshop

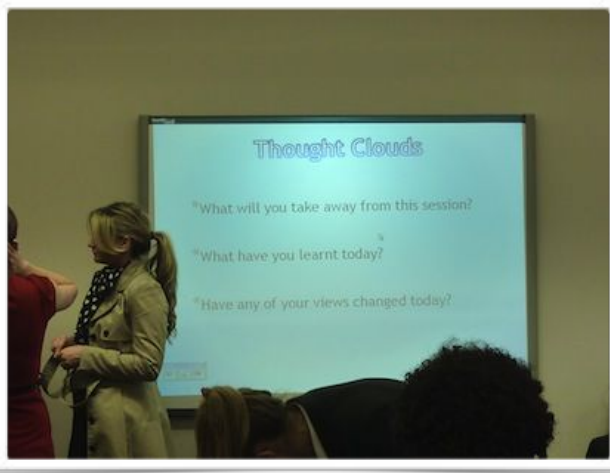


Stereotypes

In this workshop, the students experienced some similar and some different activities from those in the conflict workshop, including playing Chinese Whispers, Definition Dominoes, discussion, freeze frames, role play and reflecting on the workshop itself. Students explored the theme of ageism, with the main activity focused on looking at issues in the Dale Farm traveller eviction story from the perspective of different groups, e.g local residents or the Metropolitan Police. At the end of the session, students were invited to reflect on and write down on a 'thought cloud' a brief statement about their thoughts on the session and whether any of their views had changed.



Exploring ageism and reflecting in the stereotyping workshop



Identity

The identity workshop took place at Childwall Synagogue. Here, students explored and investigated identity with photographs looking at how people are often judged on appearance. They listened to a poem about identity and responded by asking questions. In a scenario of a girl who is considering whether to wear the hijab, students were asked to explore the issue from different

perspectives e.g. the girl's head teacher, her parents and friends. At the end of this workshop, students were invited to use a post-it note to write a word or phrase which summed up what they had learned.



Exploring identity and final reflections in the Identity workshop



Exploring Judaism and the synagogue

This workshop was led by Avril Lewis, the educator at the synagogue. In this session, students had the opportunity to visit the *Beth Hamidrash* - the



Learning about Jewish beliefs and practice at Childwall synagogue

house of learning, the main synagogue and also to find out about the weekly celebration of *Shabbat* - the Sabbath. Avril described artefacts, beliefs and practices. She also spoke about how Jews have been marginalised in society and how members of her own Jewish community are sometimes the targets of attack or abuse. Students had the opportunity to ask questions throughout.



Torah scrolls

REsilience Workshop

Led by Alastair Ross, this workshop gave an opportunity for trainee teachers, teachers who had accompanied the students and University staff to find out more about the Resilience project and to participate in some activities which explored contentious or controversial issues.



'Emoticoncepts' - which views do you agree or disagree with?

Participants were able to look at some of the REsilience materials and briefly consider some of the controversial issues dealt with through the programme.

Evaluation

At the end of the day, trainee teachers were asked to complete an evaluation form where they were asked to reflect on such things as whether the day had improved their understanding of the topics covered, had enabled them to develop new classroom strategies, assessing their confidence levels in dealing with the issues and the effectiveness of working collaboratively.

An observer's reflections

Positive outcomes

1. Trainee teachers:

- were very well prepared for the day. Workshops had been rehearsed, peer-evaluated prior to the event and honed further
- used Gateway materials to boost their confidence, knowledge and understanding of controversial issues
- had opportunities to co-deliver with fellow trainees, to observe and learn from each other, to reflect on best practice and to try new approaches in a 'safe' environment with the support of colleagues
- showed themselves to be confident in their delivery. Students were surprised when they learned that the trainees had been teaching for such a short time.
- The cross-disciplinary approach of RE and Performing Arts trainees working in collaboration meant that they were able to try and develop new pedagogic approaches and classroom strategies which would have not been possible otherwise.

2. School students:

- had opportunities to work with fellow students from quite different catchment areas
- had opportunities to consider and reflect on a range of controversial and contentious issues in a safe environment
- experienced a variety of teaching and learning styles
- had the opportunity to share their views and opinions
- had an opportunity to visit a place of worship and encounter a person of faith (*Note: most students I spoke to whilst walking to the synagogue had only ever visited a Christian place of worship. Only one had been to a non-Christian place of worship*)
- learned what behaviours are appropriate or not in a place of worship (e.g. eating in the synagogue)

- had opportunities to reflect on the consequences of pre-judging people and the possibilities of resolving conflicts
- subsequent feedback from teachers would indicate that the conference had a positive impact on students. Apart from enjoying it, teachers commented on the different ways in which students learned to communicate and how they developed confidence to express their opinions. (At the synagogue, it was reported that one boy who does not speak at all in class, felt confident enough to make some comments.) One school also indicated that attendance at the conference had persuaded more of their students to consider opting for full course GCSE Religious Studies.



3. Teachers, trainee teachers, university staff:

- had the opportunity to discuss and share with fellow professionals
- had the opportunity to gain an overview of the REsilience programme and experience working with some REsilience materials
- had the opportunity to see at first hand how some of the themes and pedagogies underpinning REsilience could be put into practice with students



Further reflections

In my view, it would be possible to replicate this conference in other HE institutions, but it requires considerable energy, enthusiasm and commitment and someone to lead it who is sufficiently familiar (or willing to become so) with the REsilience philosophy, process and materials. There is a great deal to be gained for all concerned, most importantly the trainee teachers. Although they may not realise it, the experience of:

- evaluating their confidence levels when dealing with contentious issues (through the SEQ)
- of leading the student conference
- of working in collaboration with trainees from a quite different curriculum area
- of re-evaluating this experience through completing a second SEQ and the submission of a Master's level assignment

will be enriching and invaluable in giving the trainees skills and techniques which will enable them to approach contentious issues with greater confidence.



Sharon Artley
November 2011