



Conflict, Art and Remembrance

HA Teacher Fellowship Programme 2019

Week 3: The First World War in the Classroom

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The level of engagement and depth of thinking that our teachers bring to the Fellowship is amazing, especially when you consider that they are doing this on top of full-time teaching. This week we asked them to focus on some important research about the ways in which the First World War is taught in schools and about how young people's engagement with history outside the classroom shapes their historical consciousness. You can find links to two items from the reading in the references section at the end. Using the research as a stimulus, we asked the Teacher Fellows to reflect on their own approaches to teaching about the First World War and on the ways in which past conflicts are commemorated in their schools.

Some key points emerging from the discussions were:

The need re-think approaches to teaching the First World War. Several teachers commented on this:

- “I have to admit that although I had some issues with and desire to reform my department's current approach to teaching about the First World War when I applied for the Fellowship, I had no idea of how huge and fundamental these issues were. The teaching about the First World War within our departmental scheme of work ties in with the narrowly focussed, Anglo-centric approach centred on the Western Front and trenches that Todd, Pennell and the British Council show to be overwhelmingly the model of the majority of English schools.”
- “For me, reading *Remember the World as well as the War* was very powerful. It perfectly captured the ‘knowledge gap’ between our received view and the complex, nuanced often contradictory truth of WWI as a series of conflicts that have causes that need disentangling, human experiences that need humanising and a legacy that is still being understood.”
- “There are many students who recognise the war as important, in terms of its nature and death toll but for whom the Anglo/European/Christian focus means that they view the FWW as event that doesn't relate to them. As Catriona Pennell mentions,

an empathetic approach is 'problematic in the sense that...an emphasis on suffering risks blinkering pupils to the diversity of the war's experience.' Thus, ensuring the war's global nature and consequences is taught, i.e. that we also examine experiences such as survival and freedom, is paramount to understanding its long shadow on twentieth-century history."

While all of our teachers saw a need to widen the focus when teaching about the First World War, several Teacher Fellows emphasised that this should not be at the expense learning about the Western Front. As one teacher commented:

- "I think it is important we still find time in our classrooms to examine the experiences of British soldiers in the trenches. This is probably the most iconic image of WW1 in popular culture, and we should spend time covering it and equipping our students with genuine historical knowledge of the trenches. If we don't then students might base all of their knowledge of trenches on Sainsbury's adverts!"

For some teachers, their reading led to reflections on the nature of whole-school commemoration:

- "... although our remembrance assembly last year reflected cultural moves to remember the empire troops, the focus was still very much on the suffering and futility of trench warfare and on the dead rather than those who survived. This has been an uncomfortable realisation for me."

Impact on teaching

We are full of admiration for Teacher Fellows who felt the need to respond immediately to the issues raised this week by adopting fresh approaches to their teaching:

- "The majority of my students are from a British/Pakistani background and part of the British Council report talked about the war and its links to Indian independence. This set me off on a bit of a research mission and I taught a lesson to Y8 about the links between the two wars and support for Ghandi. This went down really well and has inspired me to try and flesh it out a bit more next year."
- I've set up a simple task for my Year 9 groups at the moment - to test Dan Todman's summary of the 'received view'. I know how problematic it is to over-emphasise homogeneity here, but we need an entry point and this is not just setting up a straw man to knock it down - this is an expert view of a standard interpretation. What I intend to do is work through his summary and simply test it against the evidence.

In the longer term, informed and thoughtful discussions in history departments are a pleasing outcome of this week's reading:

- We had a surprisingly fruitful discussion in department this week around both our teaching of WWI and whole school-based remembrance activities. Our school - and perhaps our department too - has not been as innovative in WWI remembrance activities as it has in other areas, for example the celebration of Black History Month. We discussed the need to pose the question of remembrance (why do we remember? Who

should we remember? Should we even remember?) to students, so that they have a bit more agency in the continued discussion of WWI than simply buying a poppy and observing a minute's silence

This week, we've been particularly impressed by the Teacher Fellows' emerging ideas about the range of exciting ways that they could plan enquiries to 'widen the lens' on the First World War. In addition, their thinking about ways of developing more critical and inclusive approaches to commemoration in schools has also been really impressive. It would be very helpful if the resources that ultimately emerge from the Fellowship could provide approaches that would offer schools practical ways forward on both these issues.

References

- The First World War in the Classroom: Teaching and the Construction of Cultural Memory (2014) <http://ww1intheclassroom.exeter.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/FWW-in-the-Classroom-final-project-report.pdf>
- Remembering the World as well as the War (British Council, 2014) <https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/remember-the-world-as-well-as-the-war-report.pdf>