

Conference Session 1.1: Academic - Research and Teaching
Education for Religious Literacy in a Global Age: the Tony Blair Faith Foundation's
program, Face to Faith

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The aim of the Tony Blair Faith Foundation is to tackle the closed minded approach to religion that seeks to justify prejudice, and even violence, in the name of faith. The three dominant themes of all the Foundation's work are Leadership, Literacy and Lives.

Leadership involves understanding all aspects of the interconnected world and the need to live and act accordingly. This means helping leaders in all areas of life to understand and speak credibly about faith and its impact on the modern world. In particular it means increasing the understanding of religious leaders about other faiths and facilitating their encounter with them.

Literacy in the sense of combating ignorance about religion, a fertile soil for sowing discord, is a powerful tool for building empathy and friendship between faiths and building peace. The Foundation's educational work aims at overcoming ignorance and prejudice with fact and information, evidence and ideas, theology and philosophy, building a world in which people are at ease with diversity.

The lives of billions of people are touched and sometimes transformed by faith every day. In the same way that people can be stirred to anger and conflict, they can be drawn to the compassion and hope within their religious traditions. The Foundation seeks to do this with tangible demonstrations that collaboration and peace are possible between faiths, and to provide positive outcomes for all.

Since its inception in 2008, the *Face to Faith* program has brought together students in the developmentally critical 12-17 age-group from all over the world to expand and enhance their religious literacy. The program trains teachers and gives students the tools needed to engage in meaningful dialogue on faith and beliefs with those of other faiths. From Manila to Mumbai to Manchester, students talk directly to one another, using modern communications technology, about global issues of mutual concern, from a variety of faith perspectives. The Faith Foundation helps teachers, students and often parents to break down existing barriers, provides them with the knowledge, dialogue skills, critical thinking and resilience to resist divisive voices and ideologies. By talking directly to one another, the aim is to overcome stereotypes and barriers to friendship, and equip students with the skills to navigate societies where divisive voices are loud, attractive to some, and damaging.

Because the program is global in scope and linkages, and local in outreach, different safe spaces are used to bring students together to practice dialogue on faith and beliefs, including facilitated videoconferences, a secure moderated website and through local and social campaigns. Videoconferences take place between classes in different schools facilitated by trained instructors. Since 2009 over 600 videoconferences connected hundreds of students in a similar way: giving them direct exposure to different cultures and faiths in a secure environment. Some 20,000 students have participated in the program since its launch. In 2012 alone 70% of the students went on to become members of the Tony Blair Faith Foundation's online community enabling them to continue their conversations in the classroom in a secure on-line forum.

From Learning to Action

At the same time *Face to Faith* students have moved from dialogue to joint action to tackle key global challenges. Starting in February 2012 with special videoconferences that brought together students in countries such as UAE, Pakistan, Australia, and USA, Jeremy Gilley, founder of Peace One Day, set *Face to Faith* students the challenge to take action for peace in their own communities. In September, 57 *Face to Faith* schools from 13 countries around the world mobilized their local communities with a focus on UN Peace Day. Their goal was to achieve the largest ever gathering of individuals and reduction of violence in the name of peace – through their activities, 60,000 people came together to stand up for peace.

Through *Face to Faith* Social Action Campaigns, students have an opportunity to be a force for good in their communities. These leadership opportunities help students connect their deep beliefs and values with their actions and contribution to the wider community. As students hear stories about their peers around the world joining in similar campaigns, they realize that their lives are interconnected as global citizens. Connecting with people of different religions, values, and perspectives, students realize that they have the skills and knowledge to affect positive change in their local communities.

Face to Faith - teaching methods

The materials for the *Face to Faith* program are underpinned by a carefully considered approach to teaching. Course development required activities and flexible resources that could be used, or adapted to be used, in a wide range of cultural and geographical contexts, and which suit a wide range of different educational systems and cultures. There is one mandatory module of classroom activities to support the development of skills needed for respectful and meaningful dialogue on faith and beliefs. Tried and tested classroom methods with new ideas to ensure that resources provide a rich range of meaningful experiences for teachers and students alike are used. A range of classroom resources on global issues and UN special days are provided.

The approach is child-centered, in that the main concern is the experience of the student. The aim is for all students to have a positive experience in their interaction with *Face to Faith*, as well as acquiring many of the key skills that will be vital for engaged global citizens of the 21st century. The foundation to all approaches is an ethos that encourages young people to work together in a spirit of open, respectful cooperation.

The course has a compulsory first module on respect and understanding but teachers then pick classroom resources most appropriate to their local context for study. The first module teaches students how to have conversations about faith that avoid being offensive, enable genuine interaction and discussion and open up genuine dialogue rather than shut it down. Other modules encourage students to talk about global issues such as wealth and poverty, the environment, for example, while learning about a range of perspectives on the topics.

So *Face to Faith* is not explicitly a world religions study program, but it does stimulate young people to expand their religious literacy, to know about and understand the variety of different belief traditions that exist in the world (including those of a secular worldview). To help our young people to be genuine global citizens and contributors to the wellbeing of their societies, they need help to learn about the faiths and beliefs that inspire so many people around the world. It is significant that *Face to Faith* encourages young people to do this through peer education – young people learn from their peers in other countries, which does much to make the ideas that are discussed more relevant to them.

Just talking about religion and faith in an open and comfortable atmosphere is particularly important in helping young people to be able to resist the more dangerous voices of some extreme manifestations of Religion - which can use faith and belief as tools to divide societies and cultures. By giving young people the opportunity to explore ideas surrounding faith, belief and identity, in a calm and safe environment; and by giving them the opportunity to explore those ideas through respectful dialogue, we enable young people to resist the world view of extremist discourses. What is important is that students are helped to realize that there are great depths of interpretation of their sacred scriptures. Engaging in dialogue about texts, traditions and symbols, the lived experience of faiths in the lives of the students, should enable pupils to realize that this is the case and that religion needs learning, is sometimes complex, and that superficial readings giving single, simple answers are not necessarily the right ones. But respectful dialogue is *the* key skill.

Respectful Dialogue

The ability to engage in respectful dialogue is the key skill for *Face to Faith* students. Experience has consistently demonstrated that this is something which few education systems naturally support their students in, and that it is something that has to be deliberately and consistently worked at, and practiced. It is important to emphasize that, as respectful dialogue is a skill, it can be both taught and learned; the “workable units, model, practice” approach is one that is particularly valuable here.

This approach is easy to understand in terms of another skill; learning a musical instrument. Both are reduced to short, simple activities. The teacher then models the way that it should be done (and, over time, will do this often). The student then practices it, over and over again until they are fluent, and can then move on to acquire new units of the skill-set. It is also significant to note that, in acquiring these skills, there is no end point. The greatest pianist in the world does not stop practicing (if anything, they practice even more) – and never reaches “the end” in some kind of perfect performance. In this way respectful dialogue becomes a habit and a way of life.

Dialogue

Many education systems privilege debate as a core skill for students (and indeed it is extremely important), but dialogue is subtly different. This difference is probably best delineated in the following comparison: in a debate there is a winner and a loser. One person wins, through exerting superior argumentation, the other loses. In a dialogue there are two winners. I learn from you, you learn from me. We may compromise or agree to differ. Success is when students begin to excel at dialogue – approaching one another in a respectful way. It is important to note that “respect” does not mean “agree with” – indeed, respect really only comes into its own in a position of disagreement. The program trains young people to have the skills to disagree appropriately, and to find other ways to express themselves than through conflict.

Dialogue is the process of discovery about the other through inquiry, discussion and active listening. Debate usually involves trying to persuade someone that you are right, and while it is appropriate in some settings, it is not appropriate for interfaith dialogue, where there is no room for hidden agendas. The course is given so students can inform and educate each other, not persuade or convert, so teachers do intervene if they feel that the language of and style of competitive debate is being used with regards to faith and beliefs.

Active listening, asking response questions

This is a key skill for respectful dialogue. It is worth noting that this also is a particular skill set; a specific methodology for listening and deepening understanding (as well as valuing the subject), not just a term for “paying special attention”. Experience has taught, as a priority, that students need to practice the skill of being responsive and asking appropriate questions. And active listening is key for this to happen. Students who have prepared questions before a dialogue or video conference will often ignore what is being said (both by their classmates and the other side), because they are so keen to ask “their question”. Training emphasizes that students’ contributions must arise as much as possible from the moment – stimulated by what they have heard, both from the other school, and from their own classmates. This approach gives students a tool which they can use to both deepen their own dialogue, and further their own understanding. Many of the issues and ideas that are discussed are complex, and questioning enables students to break these down into their component elements so that they are more easily understood.

Cooperation in the classroom

At the root of all these activities lies the fundamental concept of cooperation. *Face to Faith* is primarily about giving young people the tools and skills to cooperate with one another in a positive way. Competition is important – but arguably competition has driven education for far too long. The emphasis upon getting a better mark than the person sitting next to you has dragged students’ (and teachers’, parents’, and governments’) to focus away from many of the aspects of education that are socially important. *Face to Faith* students are being prepared for a future world that desperately needs team players – but all too often privileges isolated and isolating methodologies and skills. So *Face to Faith* emphasizes cooperation between students, and builds this skill through all the teaching resources made available; this includes the use of Cooperative Learning (teaching strategies that help students to build a cooperative approach to work in the classroom).

Cooperation is vital - ultimately students will be unlikely to work cooperatively with students from another culture, faith or country, if they can’t cooperate with their own classmates. These are important and very powerful techniques, which allow teachers to drive participation from *all* students. (Every teacher knows the students who will be first to put their hands up with excellent answers to questions – but it is also true that there will also always be those students who go out of their way to avoid participation in any class – *Face to Faith* must engage those students as well. Cooperative Learning Strategies are simple for teachers to use, and consistently effective at engaging the whole class in active discussion. In addition to driving deeper engagement with the subject studied, the use of Cooperative Learning also facilitates a number of other important elements.

One key element is the equalization of status for each student. One of the main reasons that self-confident students are always ready to contribute is that they have always been listened to and respected – they go home to parents who are interested in what they have to say, have a consistent experience in school of being praised by their teachers, and are respected by their peers. Those who do not contribute are often likely to have had consistent life experiences that suggest the reverse. By making an effort to consciously equalize students status, the teacher begins to ensure that all students are having the kind of experiences that make them feel that their opinions, beliefs and points of view are valuable and worthy of respect.

Building the self-esteem of all students is the most fundamental starting point.

Safety and creating safe spaces is one of the underlying principles of *Face to Faith*. Many students are uncomfortable with working with whole class groups, and there are a variety of

reasons why this may be the case. Giving students the opportunity to work with limited numbers of other students in a flexible way will help them to grow rapidly in confidence. In the context of *Face to Faith*, where students are talking about beliefs, values, and ideas that are personally important to them and their families, it is particularly important to develop a classroom context where students will feel safe sharing their own perspectives. Every classroom contains diversity, and it is important that teachers create a space where that diversity can flourish and be celebrated.

Research demonstrates that using Cooperative Learning is an extremely effective technique for improving the quality and depth of learning for all students – thus by using those techniques, it is more likely that the material studied will be absorbed and acted on by the students. Teachers are able to use Cooperative Learning Strategies to model and reinforce positive social skills, and to build a genuinely cooperative, and mutually supportive environment in the classroom.

Getting students to work together is beneficial in all kinds of ways – but the experience of engaging in Cooperative learning enables students to experience the positive outcomes that they gain from cooperation – notably that working positively with others enables them to do more work more effectively, generate a broader range of responses to problems, and have a more enjoyable time while doing it. The whole experience of working together, rather than in competition, is often a new one for students (as most education systems are predicated upon a competitive ethos), and one that fundamentally embodies the most fundamental principles of *Face to Faith*.

Active child-centered learning

The *Face to Faith* approach is one that encourages active engagement; most of the lessons are centered around recommended activities in which students are required to take part; thus education becomes something that they actively engage in, rather than something that they observe passively. This builds student engagement, which is the key to profound learning. An important skill for young people the world over is the ability to mediate between different opinions and to prevent and resolve conflict – to find other ways of settling disagreement through mature, non-violent means. Building this skill is a key part of the *Face to Faith* curriculum, which is tackled both explicitly, through activities that encourage young people to identify and negotiate common ground, and also implicitly, through activities, and a general pedagogical approach, that encourages young people to work together cooperatively. Many activities that are marked in lesson plans as “Cooperative”, “Building Dialogue” or “Active Listening” contribute to the development of conflict mediation and prevention skills by students.

Teacher support

The Faith Foundation’s four years of implementation of the program have highlighted that teachers will sometimes require ongoing support in implementing the *Face to Faith* curriculum. It is a basic principle that nobody involved in delivering it, ever feels that they lack the support that they need to do a good job. *Face to Faith* provides teacher training workshops, which concentrate on supporting teachers with the basic pedagogical methods, and these are backed up by online learning opportunities. There are two-teachers-only videoconference every month, run at different times, so accessible to all time zones, discussing problems and supporting teachers overcome difficulties that they have found. Teachers are encouraged to make full use of the “teacher discussion forum” of the online community to share their experiences, explain how they have adapted the materials, and ask

for advice from their colleagues. Teachers are also encouraged to contact their “lead schools”, where experienced practitioners who have used the *Face to Faith* materials in their local context are able to model good practice. In addition to this, every teacher is supported by both a country/national coordinator (where appropriate), and by the members of the *Face to Faith* team. Teachers also have the opportunity to share with their colleagues around the world in regular videoconferences to share good practice.

Many of the activities recommended in *Face to Faith* materials involve a shift away from the model of “teacher as expert”, to one of “teacher as facilitator”. This can be challenging in more traditional learning contexts. But it is an important and necessary step. Nobody can be an ultimate expert on all the religious traditions and cultures of the world. Teachers are encouraged to embark upon various learning journeys together with their students, to share their experiences, and to use their wisdom, experience and professional judgment to help their students get as much as possible out of the materials and classroom time together.

Assessment

The term “assessment” is derived from the Latin word “*assessare*” meaning “*to sit down beside*”. This derivation is critical in understanding how *Face to Faith* students are assessed. It is always important to assess students’ development. But it is no less important to get them to assess themselves and their peers. *Face to Faith* encourages an assessment- for- learning approach; this is based upon well researched practice, and focuses on an individual approach to each student’s development. Each student ideally is constantly given opportunities to explore where they are, where they need to be, and what they need to do in order to get there. Throughout the Foundation’s materials a number of opportunities are provided to do this; particularly through the use of the *WWW/EBI* (What went well? Even better if!) methodology. Suggestions for techniques that enable students to reflect upon their content based learning, what information have they learned, are also given. This is a particularly important element of the reflective lessons that take place after each video conference. Teachers may identify opportunities for more formal assessment in accordance with their particular needs at many points in the *Face to Faith* program, but one of the most obvious is the use of regular blogging by students to reflect upon what they have learned - done through the online community, and enhanced with peer and self assessment using the approaches suggested in the resources.

Reflection on *Face to Faith* methodology

Face to Faith is a religious literacy methodology for a global age. It clearly offers a pedagogy for a world characterized by growing religious pluralism. In 2012 it connected students from across the world in 19 countries both through videoconferences and through a secure website. It is replicable with adaptation in a variety of cultures and classroom settings, though in some the challenges for teachers will be greater than for others, depending on current teaching methods. In some contexts vital technological infrastructure will be missing and classes may have to travel to centers where it is available. In others it is more important to make links *within* a particular country between students of different faiths than some of the more exciting cross world links made possible by videoconferences.

The key question is does it work? Or perhaps more importantly what criteria should be applied defining what might be meant by “is it working”? In practice the program has been evaluated against specific outcomes and some key steps towards achieving these outcomes.

Qur'anic Values

These outcomes are in harmony with the precepts of all faiths and have striking similarity to Islamic thinking on diversity, for example, those contained in the often quoted Quranic verse 49:13 - "O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise (each other). Verily the most honored of you in the sight of God is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And God has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things)." [Yusuf Ali translation but in all translations is "li ta'arafu" is translated as "so that you may know each other"].

Linguistically, following Sheikh Issam Al Bashir - who sits on the European Council for Fatwa and Research and is the former Sudanese minister for religious affairs - the Arabic can be reduced to the three letter form of "عرف" ('ain, raa, faa). This root can be developed in a number of ways with multiple meanings. So "ta'arafu" can have a number of meanings which apply to the verse, to what Allah is requiring to be done. The first is "ta'aruf" "تعارف". This means acquaintance or getting to know each other. The meaning also implies a 'long term' element to the relationship. So people of different backgrounds and faiths should interact and get to know each other. The second is "ma'rifah" "معرفة". This means knowledge. So people of different faiths need to seek knowledge of one another and seek beneficial knowledge together. The third is "ma'roof" "معروف", 'good' in the sense of good that is 'done', such as service or kindness. The same word is used in the Qu'ran in reference to 'enjoining what is good'. So people of different faiths are enjoined to do good to each other.

Success would thus mean creating *increased understanding between those of different faiths* in terms of each getting to know the other and developing a language of friendship (ta'aruf). It would also be measured by *deep learning having taken place through interfaith dialogue* (ma'rifah). And the third would be *positive social action for the Common Good*, and the development of the language of co-operative social action and kindness (ma'roof). The program's future evaluation plans longitudinal studies to measure attitudinal change in the students of different faiths who have participated in the course.

In fact Warwick University, as an external evaluator of the program has identified all three of these as key outcomes with increased understanding of different faiths in terms of explaining, describing and understanding different religious practices of other faiths as a key step on this journey. The evaluators noted that "several of the schools are engaged in ambitious and creative projects for social action and involvement", "students are able to identify the differences as well as the similarities between religious traditions to engage with these" and they were "not just speaking for themselves but are also acting as representative of their faith tradition. They also added that "the thoughtful participation of teachers in the dialogue has helped to lift the level of dialogue", emphasizing the importance of teacher training.

The Future

The program has now been accredited for use in the International GCSE, recognized by the International Baccalaureate and has been refined in response to independent evaluation findings. It works. The methodology is adaptable – though in practice many cultures seem comfortable with it and have not been seeking to make changes, and the Foundation wishes to share it. It is a methodology that could easily be replicated in teacher training centers, seminaries and training centers for religious leadership committed to religious education for a peaceful world. It is, though, labor intensive with Foundation staff working all hours on videoconferences and engaged in extensive travel for teacher training.

It is self evident that pioneering this program and sharing it globally so that it is implemented in a sustainable fashion are different things. The Foundation has already begun the process of signing memoranda of understanding with governments in order for the course to be adopted widely: to date the Palestinian Authority, Italy, Philippines, Kosovo, and shortly an Indian state. This phase of scaling up is now underway.

The *Faith to Face* program represents a new approach to religious literacy education in an age of revolutionary changes in communications technology and growing religious pluralism. It has potential and commends itself to the needs of many countries for a new generation at ease with religious diversity, at home, and ready to become global citizens abroad.