Stephen Shashoua, Director, 3FF (Three Faiths Forum)
Country of residence UK, Country of birth Canada

Exploring "The Other" - Using Technology to Compliment Interfaith Education Work

Even in our globalised world, there is scarce space in the public square where balanced and informed learning about people of different faiths and beliefs can take place. While technology provides opportunities for us to connect, it has brought about distinct challenges of how we live together in our increasingly complex and diverse world. With easy access to the wider world, we require increased learning opportunities to make sense of the differences that exist. Educational establishments are one of few hubs where this learning can occur.
Positive and sustained direct interfaith engagement has been shown to be one of the best methods to improve relations. Along with online linking and exchange, how else can technology be harnessed to bring the "other" from outside our geographical zones into the classroom? To answer, this paper will use UK based 3FF's (Three Faiths Forum) programmes and US based Project Interfaith's Ravel Unravel programme as case studies. The paper will also explore using technology to develop positive multi-faith group dynamics.

Even in our globalised world, there is scarce space in the public square where balanced and informed learning about people of different faiths and beliefs can take place. While we are living in what some call "the global neighbourhood" with one-third of the world's population on-line, we are still both living and connecting in primarily mono-cultural spaces. Technology provides an opportunity for the interfaith world to expand its reach geographically, as well as personalising the process towards local realities.

As the global has become local and vice versa primarily through the lens and technological wizardry of the mass media, our interaction as humans has become more complex. The on-line space is our new "public square" and while many feel it has the potential to act as a powerful "open society", it is subjected to too many manipulations thus making it unwieldy. This complexity and manipulation can have disastrous effects.   When Pastor Terry Jones's threats through Twitter to burn the Qu'ran directly leads to deadly riots in Afghanistan, we understand that interfaith must engage directly in the on-line space to counter misunderstanding and conflict.

The manner in which technology can be used by the interfaith field, range from campaigns to online facilitated engagement to educational resources. What technology is used range

from "Low-tech" off-line methods requiring only the use of a mobile phone or computer for game and video use, and "Hi-tech" methods which usually requiring high-speed broadband to power video conferencing and complex applications/programmes.

This is not an academic paper but an analysis of lessons learned through 3FF's (the Three Faiths Forum) use of Low-tech technology in its work in interfaith education in the UK as well as an exploration of Project Interfaith's RavelUnravel.com, an interactive video interview website based in the United States but developed for international use.

Contact-Connect

Interfaith relations have primarily and correctly depended upon Contact Theory as the best ways to improve relations amongst groups and individuals who are experiencing conflict. Neither media nor incidental contact with others (such as living and working alongside them) are substitutes for the demonstrable value of face-to-face contact in fostering mutual empathy and cooperation.[1] While we can demonstrate that positive contact tackles prejudice, there are inherent difficulties with using this process on a large scale and internationally. These difficulties can be summed up as issues around reach, space (geography), and skills (authenticity, resources, language).

Reach

3FF have used Contact Theory to work with young people, primarily in schools. The Faith-School linking programme works in different cities across England physically linking 55 primary and secondary schools in pairs or trios. 3FF's school workshops which work with 70+ individual schools per year, engage either with schools with diverse ethnic/religious populations or uses a speakers from different backgrounds as "intermediaries" to encourage interfaith learning. While these programmes reach around 10,000 young people a year on a one-off or sustained basis, this is of course a tiny number compared to the 3.7 million pupils in secondary schools in the UK[2]. Therefore, with the great number of schools in the UK and the limited capacity of good providers, this model is not sustainable.

---

[1] Ana Lindh Foundation Euro-Med Intercultural Trends Report
[2] UK Department of Education, January 2010

Similarly Project Interfaith's work prior to Ravel Unravel, was on supplying resources and face-to-face engagement primarily for the Omaha, Nebraska area. If we are to work towards the embedding of these processes in communities and educational establishment in the UK, US and the world over, we require extremely long-term investment and focus. In terms of schools work, some ways to start bridging the "reach" gap are for interfaith education methods to embed in the school curriculum and school ethos and involve processes such as teacher training, school linking, and educational resourcing. Systems such as 3FF's Art of Asking and RavelUnravel can be tailored and replicated the world over in order to extend the reach of interfaith.

Space

While direct engagement is the most desired method to strengthen interfaith relations, the problem of reach extends to geography. Traditionally, interfaith has focused on costly and logistically demanding exchange programmes. These methods are still highly meritorious especially if they focus on leaders who will act as catalysts for the learning following the engagement. In these cases indirect second-hand positive contact is employed where we can affect others in communities simply by talking about our change of attitudes and experience with others[3]. Unfortunately, because most often participants are self-selecting many of these programmes often do not reach the areas in community where they may be most needed. To reiterate, we must return to the issue that this method is not cost-effective and has limited reach.

With the development of video conferencing technology, initiatives such as the Tony Blair Faith Foundation's Face to Faith Programme, which is virtually linking schools in over 19 countries, have successfully utilised technology to bridge the international gap. Systems such as these must be adopted where possible.

---

[3] Paolini, S., Hewstone, M., Cairns, E., & Voci, A. (2004). Effects of direct and indirect cross-group friendships on judgments of Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland: The mediating role of an anxiety-reduction mechanism. Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 30, 770-786.

In areas where there is either insufficient internet capacity or resources to link (remote facilitation, translation, and coordination is often needed), the low-tech options of using video resources can be employed.

Skills

With scant resources in the field available to measure the efficacy of interfaith programming, there is no recognised benchmark for facilitating interfaith properly. As a result, even with the best of intentions, practitioners may be reinforcing stereotypes. Religious Education is a statutory requirement in all state-funded schools in the UK, however 3FF's experience in classrooms shows the curricula and teaching is often insufficient to address the emergence of prejudice. The materials used by teachers are often self generated (typically from internet searches) and materials are "often compromised by inaccuracy, imbalance and lack of depth in their portrayal"[4]. Lessons often ignore the importance of demonstrating the plurality of belief or practice within communities. They do not adequately explain when laws or customs are seemingly transgressed by an individual or group e.g. people who do not follow dietary requirements or who kill others in the name of their religion. Pupils are often offered an idealised version of a religion, one that is quickly shown to be false. Pupils find these inconsistencies between belief and action confusing, and the true learning may be lost, whilst stereotypes are reinforced.

Through skills training and the use of resources, teachers can learn to run their own sessions and use RavelUnravel. In areas which cannot use the content directly, because of language or local sensitivities, these and other resources allow for user generated content. Complexity

For interfaith education to be done well, the complexity of a faith, community, and individual must be brought out to participants. Once these are revealed, humanisation can occur. When using resources such as 3FF's Skills for Dialogue and RavelUnravel, one of the main aims is to humanise the subject in the video, by students exploring the multiple parts

---

[4] Jackson, Ipgrave, Hayward, Hopkins, Fancourt, Robbins, Francis and McKenna, 2010. *Materials used to Teach about World Religions in Schools in England.* Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of Warwick.

of the identity of the individual. For the learning to be more rounded, the individual in the video must then be seen as part of a faith/belief community of similar complex individuals. Failure to achieve this, would make the individual separate from the group and not achieve the programmes' aims.

Case Study 1: 3FF - Using technology for dialogue simulation and communication training

3FF's Skills 4 Dialogue & Communication activities are designed to help young people become more confident, sensitive and effective intercultural/interfaith communicators. The two facilitator-led workshops "The Art of Empathy" (AOE) and "The Art of Asking" (AOA) are built around "video encounters" with 3FF's trained speakers. These short clips isolate particular moments in an encounter, be it the first meeting, listening to someone's personal journey, or asking each other questions. By allowing young people to imagine themselves into an encounter without the pressure of having to perform, or fear of causing offense, 3FF creates a safe space for reflection on the characteristics of empathetic engagement and positively phrased curiosity.

"Skills 4 Dialogue" can stand alone as a pair of complementary activities, or they can be followed by 3FF's "Encountering Faiths & Beliefs" workshop, where students can put their new-found skills and confidence into practice by interacting with three trained speakers from different backgrounds. Even when the workshops are run without a subsequent encounter, the facilitator always frames these activities as "practice/preparation for real-world encounters." This helps young people get to a deeper level of discussion and understanding when they finally meet someone of a different faith or belief.

The "Art of Empathy" (AOE) starts with helping young people explore the complexity of their own identities, and hence recognise that everyone they encounter will be highly complex too. Through this the facilitator elicits the principle of empathy –just as we wish for someone to understand us in all our complexity, we need to recognise other people's different facets and identities. We then explore how to do this in practice.

In the "Art of Empathy," the video encounter with Hindu Speaker Suchitra is prefaced with a

classroom activity to help students reflect on their own identities. This is designed to emphasise that encounters are two-way – by recognising our own complexity and ambiguity, we are more able to recognise those in others.

We preface the video encounter by first making students make an "identity cupboard", an activity during which they record other people's perceptions of them and the elements of their identities they share with different people.

This paves the way for discussion around the complexity of identity – what is visible/invisible, at what stage we choose to share certain things, the fluidity of identifying strongly with certain identities when we are in particular contexts. They also discuss the judgments that are made about us, and the judgments we all make about others.

The Technology

Students are now prepared to "meet" Suchitra through a video encounter. They are invited to share what they can tell about Suchitra from her appearance. Young people suggest: That she is a woman. That she's probably in her 30s. That she has darker skin so maybe from India or the Middle East. They all acknowledge that they cannot know for sure and would need to learn more.

The students explore how to approach someone new if they want them to feel comfortable sharing what's inside their cupboard and how would they welcome Suchitra if she was with them. "We need to smile at her," suggests one young person. "We should her ask them questions about herself." "We shouldn't pre-judge her – we should wait to hear what she has to say about herself."

The facilitator then shares 3FF's CLICK tool, which prepares the students to listen when encountering someone new. The video plays, and Suchitra tells the audience that she is Hindu, also a wife, mother, daughter, friend, and a host of other characteristics. She describes her upbringing surrounded by Hindu imagery in India, and the stories her parents and grandparents would tell her from the Hindu epics which have informed her values growing up. It is a short, simple presentation, but rich in detail, and students often comment on Suchitra's approachability and enthusiasm as something they admire.

In the "Art of Asking" (AOA), similarly to the previous programme, trained Speakers appear in short video clips answering questions about their faith/belief backgrounds. The workshop revolves around two kinds of questions. Those which are aggressive, or contain stereotypes/generalisations that could be construed as offensive, and those which are better phrased, more sensitive and/or give the answerer space to answer.

The students are invited to observe the effects of the questions on the Speakers in the videos. Responses to the aggressive questions vary from angry, to shy, to upset. They tend to be short and don't provide much information that the asker seeks. After a classroom activity where students analyse and reformulate questions to be more conducive to dialogue, students can then choose to watch video responses to the kinder, more open questions. The Speakers seem visibly more relaxed and they give more information.

By isolating these answers to questions in video clips, young people can instantly recognise the effect language has on behaviour and discuss it – we are talking about how we talk, before getting to the actual talking about faiths, beliefs and cultures. AOA is also used in teacher training to help teachers practice responding to challenging questions from students.

Case Study 2: Project Interfaith's RavelUnravel.com
Launched in May 2012, Project Interfaith's RavelUnravel is a highly interactive site containing more than 790 video interviews of community members answering questions relating to their religious or spiritual identities, stereotypes associated with these identities, and how welcoming they find their communities to be towards such religious or spiritual paths. The site is open to individuals around the world free of charge.

RavelUnravel.com's interactive features enable users to discover religious and cultural diversity simply with the use of the internet. Once registered, users can browse videos in a number of ways using specific search terms. Because each video is tagged with demographic information, users can define their own search criteria to browse videos by location, gender,

age group, etc. After watching a video, users are able to discuss its content through interactive comment sections. Users can also link their favourite videos to their Facebook, Pinterest or Twitter social media accounts. Each video has associated web links to educational resources, so that users can learn more about the religions and belief systems of the identities featured on the site. Finally, users are encouraged to upload their own videos in order to share their own stories and add to the tapestry of religious and spiritual identities represented on the website.

RavelUnravel Curriculum Guides for Middle Schools, High Schools, and Colleges

RavelUnravel Curriculum Guides build upon RavelUnravel's interactive and personalized approach to exploring religious, spiritual and cultural identity. Each set provides age-appropriate educational activities and resources on religious and cultural diversity to middle school, high school and college students and educators. Curriculum Guides further Project Interfaith's mission not only by exposing students to a wide range of religious and cultural identities, but also by challenging assumptions and building critical thinking and conversation skills about these subjects. The Curriculum Guides build upon RavelUnravel.com's three themes surrounding religious and cultural diversity: identity, stereotypes, and creating a welcoming community. They give students and teachers opportunities to:
• "Meet" individuals of diverse beliefs and cultures in an interactive manner;
• See the diversity both between and within various religions and belief systems;
• Build skills to identify and dispel stereotypes and create a welcoming space; and
• Reflect and engage in dialogue about misconceptions, prejudices and assumptions.

Each RavelUnravel Curriculum set will contain the following resources:

• An overview of RavelUnravel.com and a brief tutorial on navigating the site;
• A description of the intended audience for the particular set of curriculum;
• A breakdown of the goals and expected outcomes that will result from the coursework;

- A student self-assessment to gauge students' comfort level in discussing RavelUnravel's themes;

- Ground rules for discussion to ensure respectful classroom conversation and debate;

- A glossary of terms and definitions to assist in providing a common language for the class-room;

- Thematic units for discussion including identity, values, stereotypes, context and culture, and hospitality;

- Guided discussion questions, recommended videos, pre and post video-viewing exercises and activities for each theme; and

- Educator and Student Evaluations to gauge the reception and quality of the curriculum.

Using Technology for Multifaith Group Experience

Traditionally interfaith has consisted primarily of dialogue. While this is necessary at every level, dialogians have consisted mainly of religious/communal/lay leaders and academics. In recent years there has been a focus on young people in interfaith doing shared and social action. Through 3FF's Urban Dialogues events programme we are currently exploring experiential learning through site specific digital technology for group experiences.

With the use of mobile phones, smart phones, and video game paddles, a plethora of different potential activities can be engaged with both in private and public spaces. One example are live multiplayer games created by wallFour, who have created a system that allows up to 100 simultaneous players to interact with giant digital projection screens using laser pointers. Their games "require complete cooperation, relying on visual cues to understand and eventually accomplish a mutually desired goal". There are many such games and puzzles for audiences such as Splat by Big Play and Collablocks both which use smartphones in the creation of a new genre which many call Live Collaborative Crowd Gaming.

While these programmes were created primarily as games, the technology is there for adaptation towards exploring faith and identity differences in fun and unobtrusive ways. Similarly, the popularity of applications (apps) for smart-phone and tablets, make this

another innovative manner to engage large numbers. These technologies would be great tools to reach the young generation of Digital Natives as well as young professionals who do not readily engage in interfaith.

The Future

With further embedding and development of technology throughout the world in classrooms and in the public square, more opportunities will arise that the interfaith field could engage with.

With the development of virtual reality and head-mounted displays, like Google Glass or Oculus Rift, which either display computer generated images or show live images from the real world or a combination of both, the possibilities around developing formulated international encounters are endless.

Google Glasses for example are fit with video cameras so that an audience can actually see through a viewer's eyes, virtually walking in someone else's shoes. This technology will be used in a variety of different ways, some which we would see as harmful, how the interfaith field uses it is still to be explored.

Conclusion

Interfaith has always struggled to scale up to large numbers. With the development innovative tools and learning in interfaith education, we now have programmes that can reach further than ever before. Combining these programmes with technology, like 3FF's Skills for Dialogue and RavelUnravel.com, allows us to potentially reach anybody who has a smartphone, tablet or computer. The need is apparent and the methods are sufficiently numerous in order to reach people where they are geographically, at their level, and in a culturally sensitive manner. With scarce space in the public square where balanced and informed learning about people of different faiths and beliefs can take place, technology provides both another "neighbourhood" as well as a compliment to existing learning methods to be explored. Only through methods such as these can the true complexity of our world and the individuals which inhabit it be learned and humanised.