Teaching the history of Terrorism

**Flashbulb memories**

Everyone has their ‘I remember where I was when...’ moment. I think psychologists call them ‘flashbulb memories’. Depending on your age or generation, it might be a memory of exactly what you were doing when you found out World War II had ended ... or where you were when the news of JFK’s assassination reached you. Personally, I have three ‘flashbulb memories’.

Firstly (and in chronological order!), I vividly remember where I was when I found out that the Herald of Free Enterprise car ferry had capsized in 1987. It was a Friday (my birthday - 6th March) and I remember sitting with my mum watching the breaking newsflash (after Blankety Blank had just finished). It was particularly chilling for me because my mum and I were meant to be on that particular ferry that night. It was only due to the fact that my mum’s Talbot Avenger had broken down (again) that we didn’t get to travel down to Dover and depart on the day trip to Belgium.

I also remember where I was when I heard the news of Diana, Princess of Wales’ car accident and subsequent death in 1997. I remember the shockwaves around my school as TV sets tuned in to the live coverage of the terror attacks on the World Trade Centre and Pentagon building in September 2001.

**Lack of knowledge and understanding**

In a very recent unscientific poll of teachers and support staff in my school staff room (all aged between 23 and 42) I asked what their most recent ‘flashbulb memory’ was. All of them said the September 11th attacks. Interestingly, I asked my Year 8 form class whether they have any recollection at all of the 9/11 attacks – and every one of them said ‘no’. The reason for their lack of knowledge and understanding of the 9/11 attacks is simple to explain though - they were three or four years of age when they took place, and haven’t been taught about them since! Personally then, I feel it’s important that young people are made aware of something that has made such an impact (and continues to make an impact) on their world. So as the tenth anniversary of these attacks looms, I thought it appropriate that I share how our History department will be teaching about 9/11 this year.
Something that young people should try to understand

At my school, we have always taught about the 9/11 attacks. From hurried beginnings (a basic information worksheet quickly typed on the evening of September 11th 2001 and given to all form tutors on the morning of the 12th) to the more detailed plans we have in place now, I have always felt that the attacks were something that young people should try to understand. We spend about six to twelve lessons on the whole topic now (depending on the group), which isn't really enough, but it's all the time we can find in our busy current scheme. We teach it in Year 9, towards the end of the Summer Term.

Mind mapping/brainstorming

Generally speaking, we follow a classic short scheme of work pattern – establish what students already know, build on it and add detail and depth, then assess them on what they have learned. In the first lesson or two we get the students to work in small groups – mind mapping/brainstorming the word ‘terrorism’. We guide their mapping by getting them to think about the word ‘terrorist’, examples of terrorism, types of terrorism, prevention of terrorism etc. I use chapters from my Depth Study textbook 'Terrorism: The Rise of Terror Tactics in the Modern World', particularly the chapters entitled ‘What is terrorism?’ and ‘What are the different types of terrorism?’.

As always, I try to make the topic as ‘current’ as possible by pulling up some of the world’s most recent terror attacks on my whiteboard (e.g. ‘List of terrorist incidents, 2010’ on Wikipedia) or by showing the newsflash reports on YouTube of the 9/11 attacks as they were first reported on US and UK TV channels on 11th September 2001, and also the 7/7 London Bombings news coverage from 2005. Indeed, the way the reporters on BBC Radio London gradually pieced together the 7/7 attacks after their initial ‘we’ve got some major incidents occurring at the moment’ travel report at 9:15am that day is truly fascinating ... and it is all on YouTube (type ‘July 7th 2005 BBC Radio London 9:15am’).

Looking at longer term causes

Depending on the groups we have, we then tend to work our way through the 9/11 attacks over the next few lessons, looking at longer term causes such as the origins of al-Qaeda’s Declaration of War in the late 1990s, then onto early al-Qaeda attacks, a timeline of the attacks on September 11th followed by the War on Terror and its ongoing legacy. Again, I use a set of my textbooks that outlines this topic in some detail, but I also like (time permitting) to show some of James and Gédéon Naudet’s excellent documentary film 9/11. I also strongly recommend a BBC website called ‘America’s Day of Terror’ which outlines the events of 9/11 in detail and includes a superb eight minute video summary entitled ‘The BBC looks back at the day’.

Conspiracy theories

A great homework task we’ve set in the past has been focussed on the ‘conspiracy theories’ behind the 9/11 attacks. I encourage students to research them, write about them if they want to, but to come to our next lesson with an opinion that they want to express. Some students come convinced that the US government blew up the towers in controlled explosions, whilst others are not swayed at all by such theories. The lesson after this homework task is always lively – but an incredibly valuable learning experience for the students.

All good schemes should evolve

The way we’ve taught the 9/11 attacks has changed each year and keeps evolving (as all good schemes should) with each new investigation, TV programme, viewpoint, or theory. I am particularly looking forward to the new ‘9/11 Education Programme’ which launches in early September 2011. I attended the SHP conference at Leeds Trinity in July where the delegates were introduced to a new website that focuses on the 9/11 attacks and includes an interactive timeline, news footage, an image and film bank, supporting printable materials and PowerPoints as well as whole—school activities. The site goes live on 5th September and can be found at www.911educationprogramme.co.uk. Even in its early ‘sample stage’, the site has certainly provided much food for thought for me with its enquiry approach that covers such questions as ‘What made 9/11 so shocking?’ and ‘What can we learn from 9/11?’

A gripping, intriguing and totally relevant topic

Indeed, there are lots and lots of resources out there to help cover the 9/11 attacks – and the build-up (both long and short term), the events of September 11th, the aftermath and the legacy make for excellent topics to cover. In September 2011 we will be bringing the topic forward in our teaching schedule (for obvious reasons) and begin Year 9 with it in the Autumn Term - so if you want to start your Year 9 students off with a gripping, intriguing and totally relevant topic, I strongly suggest teaching the history of terrorism.

Best wishes,