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Teaching after 9/11

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Abstract

Robert Gardner is a Social Studies teacher at a large urban high school in Edmonton with a widely diverse ethnic population. He observes that after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 his students became much more engaged in discussion of international issues and more willing to share their personal experiences of life outside of Canada. Mr. Gardner soon found that he needed to learn far more about Middle Eastern history, culture and religion to better understand and to better teach current events from a range of perspectives.

It was, of course, one of those "where-were-you-when..?" moments that we will all remember forever. Like many people everywhere on September 11, 2001 I awoke to the stunning news of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center. As information came out and the enormity of the event became clearer I instinctively concluded that something had changed that morning, the world had somehow lurched onto a new path in a direction as yet unknown. And just as the world was changed so too was my classroom experience. In the hours and days immediately following the attacks I would be pulled out of what had been a relatively comfortable and familiar teaching practice into a much more demanding and complicated circumstance. I found that I had to significantly expand my knowledge and understanding of the intricacies of world history, cultures and religions. I also found that my students became more animated in classroom discussions, more aware of world events and more willing to share personal perceptions, however harsh. I became a citizen of the world because the world came to me.

I teach at a large urban high school of 2200 students. It has a widely diverse ethnic population represented by students from dozens of countries, which speak over a hundred languages and embrace numerous religions, beliefs and political perspectives. The students are the sons and daughters of immigrants, of multi-millionaire businessmen, of refugees, or are themselves refugees. Only half the students are white whose parents come from Alberta. Some boys wear turbans; some girls wear the hijab. Indian girls practice traditional dancing after school. There are various morning and lunchtime prayer groups consisting of Muslims, Christians, and others. In this environment multiculturalism is celebrated, most students mix easily and are eager to learn about each other's customs, faiths, cultures and ancestry. This is reflected in the annual "culture-fest," a festival of exotic food, music and dance, a weeklong kaleidoscope of colour, scent and sound. The school is a microcosm of humanity, a concrete expression of the new Canadian pluralism and of globalization, a preview of what all of Canada is becoming. I

sometimes tell visitors, "This is the future. Get used to it." It is against this backdrop that the implications of Sept 11 developed.

I rushed to the school library that Tuesday to watch the news live on TV. Witnessing the collapse of the first WTC tower made me feel ill. The televised images of 110 stories of crumbling steel and concrete were terrifying, yet beside me three students of apparent Middle Eastern decent were beaming. With near giddiness and a clenched fist one of them whispered, "Yessss!" Another, practically shaking with excitement added, "It's the Palestinians. They're fighting back." I was well aware of a certain anti-American sentiment flowing through our student population, due mostly to perceived arrogance of US power and wealth. However this expression of near joy in the face of unimaginable destruction startled me. I continued the nervous morning in my classroom where many students expressed shock and worry at the breaking news. Both towers had collapsed; the Pentagon was under attack, all North American aircraft traffic grounded. Uncertainty and fear ruled the hours, and students' questions were the obvious ones. Who could do this? How could such a thing happen? In response, several of my Arab and African students offered their take on events. "It's about time." "Surprised it didn't happen earlier." "The Americans deserve it." My sheltered Alberta-bred students and I were treated to a shopping list of US foreign policies characterized by hypocrisy, betrayal, lies and violence around the world. I have long understood the hypocrisy of US foreign policy, but what was interesting here was the personal anger and frustration of many students. "Hundreds of Palestinians get killed, and their homes destroyed by Israeli police, but it's not news. A couple of buildings fall down and suddenly the whole world cares." and "Now the Americans know how it feels."

Many students admire the United States, its economic and military might, its sports heroes and its popular culture, yet many others have come, through personal experience or inherited opinions, to despise America. The September 11 wound inflicted on the United States seemed to be a catalyst for expressions of anger rather than shock or empathy. I observed that it was the students of foreign ancestry who were most vocal and critical. Even if they were actually born in Canada they seemed to have a larger perspective since they generally knew more about geopolitics and international events than the homegrown group. It became clearer that these students had relatives scattered around the globe, or had adopted their parents' views, or got their news from illegal satellite receptions of Arab TV networks. 9/11 was an event of such significance that everyone had an opinion or a question. This exposed the wide range of worldviews that students now felt free - perhaps compelled - to share. What began to transpire was a real dialogue among students of varied backgrounds about how they saw the larger world. Who were the "good guys" and the "bad guys?" What did justice mean in a world of militarism, terrorism and oppression? What things in life were worth fighting for? Acts of terror were no longer senseless after learning the back story of US presence in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, and the policies toward Palestine and Afghanistan. A deeper knowledge from a multitude of perspectives emerged.

The shock of September 11 has dissipated, but global upheaval continues. Indeed, the past two years have brought remarkable changes to the international scene. A global economic downturn has reduced travel and trade, there is an increased preoccupation with security, and we've seen war in Afghanistan and in Iraq, neither of which has yet been resolved. The US has embarked

on an aggressive foreign policy that would make Teddy Roosevelt blush. The path of international relations seems to have turned backward to what Gwynne Dyer refers to as "the old world order," the use of coercion and brute force as instruments of policy. This has presented challenges for me. Young people are often cynical about the world so I have often tried to argue that things have been getting better in recent years: the Cold War over, peace breaking out everywhere, greater international cooperation has resulted in progress. That's a tough sell these days. Militarism is on the rise, terror is potentially everywhere, and anyone could be a victim - or a suspect. My young citizens are coming of age, becoming globally aware at an uncomfortable time.

This spills over into students' opinions about geo-politics and about the United States. Nearly all non-white students either distrust or are openly hostile to the US as a political entity, particularly the President. These tensions were exacerbated by the war in Iraq. Classroom debates over the merits of invading that country tended to divide over trust in the US, not over the villainy of the Hussein regime. "Iraq is a threat to peace," some students would say. "The US is a bigger threat," came the reply. "Hussein has weapons of mass destruction." "Bush has more of them." "Saddam is a dictator." "How do you think Bush become president?" Contrasting perspectives became sharper and opinions more polarized as areas of gray gave way to black and white. The UN, the president, or the Prime Minister were right or wrong, calculating or naive, reasonable or useless.

With such division I sometimes wondered about contending loyalties. If forced to choose, would my students support their country of ethnic origin or their new home of Canada? Might there be shouting or fights in the hallways over foreign policy? Fortunately, I was able to maintain the safe distance of a detached observer of world affairs. Say what you will about Mr. Chretien; the Prime Minister did me a favour by not committing troops to Iraq. I would not wish to be in a school where half the students were "proud of our boys and girls fighting for freedom" and half angered over "an unjustified invasion by American imperialists wanting cheap oil." If anything, the majority of students became united in anti-American sentiment.

I felt a need to modify my teaching practice to accommodate a more complex dynamic of views. It is true that Social Studies teachers are expected to articulate or explain multiple perspectives on a range of issues, and need to discuss controversial topics in a balanced way, give fair consideration to conflicting viewpoints. However, sometimes I found this approach limiting. While not advocating a particular position I wanted my students to at least understand the motives for certain actions, and his put me in the curious position of attempting to defend extreme points of view. In an effort to find clarity I sometimes reach for blatant imbalance. "If Israeli soldiers evict you from your own home, bulldoze your house and arrest your brother, how would you feel? How would respond?" Or, "How do you fight back against an enemy of vastly superior strength? What tools are open to you?" Against calls of "war-monger" or "Bush is a moron" I find myself defending the President. "Is it not his responsibility to protect his citizens as best he can? If Bush has to invade every dictator-run nation on earth to root out those who are pledged to killing his countrymen, shouldn't he do it? Would you not demand the same of your Prime Minister?" It is an interesting exercise, trying to rationalize extremism.
When not bashing US policy, students freely express their thoughts on other world issues and sometimes reveal new perspectives on conventional wisdom. "Pakistan's President Musharraf is

a military dictator and the state is corrupt, but it's a big improvement over the previous democratic regime." "In the United Arab Emirates the Royal Family looks after all the citizens. There is no poverty, no crime; much better than Canada." I was surprised to learn that quite a few of my students were unimpressed by the ideals of democracy, yet one of the goals of the curriculum is to teach democratic citizenship. Should they fail a particular element of the program because they see things differently than I? Just as I was trying to explain certain perspective to them, they were trying to teach me how they saw the world. For all the reading I've done and listening to students there are limits to my understanding. Sometimes I encounter a moment when a student's angry experience holds more meaning than my attempt at "balanced explanation." One day I offered that Islam is a peaceful, enlightened religion. A grade 12 girl indignantly replied, "No it's not. My family is Sikh. My grandfather had property in Pakistan, but the family had to escape when Muslims tried to convert him. Jihad is hatred of anyone non-Muslim." At a significant level she knows better than I, I am a unilingual white male infidel from Alberta. What do I know?

At school the politics of identity have changed because of 9/11. Ethnicity and culture used to be curiosities. Now, while diversity is still celebrated, there is a new recognition that ethnicity can be an undesirable element of one's identity. I have students in my classes that could be detained at the US border, photographed and fingerprinted because of where they or their parents were born. Some of them would love to travel America to see Washington or the Florida coast or perhaps Disneyland, but now their parents have precluded it. They don't wish to be hassled because of their colour, their last names or their birth certificates. This in itself creates an interesting divide among students: those who are welcome to enjoy America in all its grandeur and excess, and those who would be treated as suspects. This probably develops a deeper resentment of the US. Not only do many students have friends or family who have been directly or indirectly victimized by American policy, but now these young people themselves must feel some discomfort in the land of the free.

World events and students' reactions to them have underscored the inadequacy of the current curriculum. The woeful shortcomings of textbooks and support materials have become pronounced. There is scant treatment of Middle Eastern history or politics outside of the contexts of World War or Cold War. Because publishers and ministries of education try to avoid controversial topics there is no mention of the intricacies of religious thought. Even the conventional model of the political spectrum shows cracks as the right calls for greater security and limits to freedoms while the left decries loss of individual rights and privacy.

I need to re-learn the content of my trade, almost as a beginning teacher. I've had to explore the difference between Sunnis and Shi'ias and why these Muslims would do violence to each other; how the Taliban took over Afghanistan, what passages in the Koran could be interpreted as license for killing. My VISA bill at Indigo-Chapters is becoming a burden. The shamefully inadequate war coverage by CNN forced me to seek out alternative media resources for information on the war. These days my news "diet" consists of helpings of BBC and the Al Jazeera web site just for variety.

I do find the teaching of Social Studies more difficult now. I need to learn much more about the world so that I can respond intelligently to students' questions and comments, and sometimes

simply to referee debate. However challenging, it is also an extraordinary opportunity. Since I can't know everything I've developed a partnership with some of my students who watch late night Arab TV. We discuss the news from the different angles. And this gives students a chance to share details and stories of their personal faiths in the context of world events. Notably, these discussions were never heated however energized. When voices were raised they were invariably in order to clarify points or to add details to some concept. It was an exploration more than a debate, the beginnings of what Dr. David Geoffrey Smith calls "intercivilizational dialogue."

The events of 9/11 exploded the myth of "us" and "them" or "here" and "there." Foreign war and political upheaval are not far-away things because they have a direct link to a young person sitting in my classroom. Globalization has brought us together in a strange place: a small classroom in Western Canada. Yet we are all connected to the larger world and what happens in the world affects us all individually and collectively.