

## Creating counter-narratives: The global village - Tranby College's Mock United Nations

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Goodmorning,

Our students have just re-enacted for you some of the key ideas, issues and events that came out of our Mock United Nations Day at Tranby College in August this year. These students were our 'guinea pigs' so to speak for creating opportunities for students today to experience learning in a different context, using a real life organisation - The United and real life issues that affect thousands of people daily.

*I believe that they need our help, people are dying, children are watching people get murdered and if your country has the resources to help why wouldn't you? (Elyssa Gorski, 2015).*

This powerful quotes comes from one of our students.

It is emotive language like this, spoken in the tongue - so to speak - of a Year 9 student, that empowers teachers to challenge students to be change agents.

The United Nations came into existence in the closing days of the Second World War. It had one central mission: the maintenance of international peace and security. Through working to prevent conflict, encourage peacekeeping and creating conditions for peace to flourish in world. The United Nations Security

Council and General Assembly plays a major role in promoting cooperation throughout the world. It upholds international law, protects human rights and delivers humanitarian aid to those in need.

Through the Australian Curriculum General Capabilities and Humanities and Social Science content Knowledge and Understanding & Skills we used concept based teaching to empower our students to explore issues of social justice and propose solutions to these problems on the world today.

In Year 9 Humanities at Tranby College students study four subjects:

- History
- Geography
- Business & Economics and
- Civics and Citizenship.

As students develop increasing independence in their critical thinking and skills application we wanted to challenge our students, by getting them to question the world that they live in. This was done through inquiry, reflection and a publicly presented project. Through investigating events, developments, issues and phenomena, both historically and contemporarily.

Through the application of these skills our students participated in a Mock United Nations Day. We built on their understandings of democratic values, justice and participation through the four resolutions proposed to the students by the Year 9 teaching team, who included Alex Kelly, Robyn Day, Jennifer Florance and myself. We urged them to select and analyse information in order

to draw conclusions about their country and how it has changed over time to participate in a globalising world. They accounted for different interpretations and points of view by listening to other member states have their say on the proposed resolutions. They synthesised information into 'big picture' ideas by identifying trends and relationships of shared perspectives between countries or differing ideas between others. They reflected on their experiences drawing, evidence based conclusions. These reflections fostered an empathetic understanding of the world that they live in and have helped them to decipher another part of the puzzle that is 2015. It was these reflections that fostered within some of the students a collective action to want to help improve the world that they live in. It is this approach to education that inspires us to continue teaching the way we do. To break down social barriers and empower our students to break the dominant narratives within society, producing their own counter narrative (hence, our title). This idea is not new, Elizabeth Ellsworth (1989) wrote in the *Harvard Educational Review* that teachers who seek to help students speak in their "authentic voices" are seen to "make themselves visible and define themselves as authors of their own world. Such self-definition presumably gives students an identity and political position from which to act as agents of social change" (p. 309).

The driving question of this project was open-ended, fostering an atmosphere of creative and critical thinking amongst our students. We sparked student interest in this project by allowing them to create their own content through

the choosing of their own country to research and role-play on the United Nations Day. Our students were asked to choose and produce the following

- Choose a member state of the United Nations and produce a Country Report detailing its history, culture, education, geography, political system and structure, etc.
- From their Country Reports, students were asked to choose one relevant current event effecting their country and produce a digital resource in the form of a speech detailing this to their audience.
- Plan cuisine from their country to share with other member states on the United Nations Day (some of which you can taste today).
- Dress appropriately in National Dress to symbolise the country they represented.
- Through explicit content teaching students rotated around to 'specialist' on four relevant up to date issues affecting our global world. They were then asked, from the perspective of their country, to produce solutions to the resolutions. These issues were
  - o The situation in Iraq & Syria
  - o Towards a nuclear free world
  - o The Ebola epidemic in West Africa &
  - o Towards a New International Economic Order.

These are some of the essential elements of Project Based Learning that our students at Tranby College experienced throughout the project:

- 1. Significant Content** – In providing opportunities for our students to engage in real life learning situations, we asked our students to role play the perspective of the country they had done extensive inquiry into (having produced a county report) and readying their solutions to the resolutions to be discussed on the United Nations Day. Fletcher (2004) advocates teachers must engage their audiences in meaningful curriculum. This, according to Freire (2000) can foster a critical consciousness in students, allowing them to be change agents. This is advocated through the following passage from the Pedagogy of the Oppressed, “in problem- posing education, people develop the power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation” (p. 83).
- 2. Student voice and choice** – Throughout this project the objective of providing our students with a voice and choice of content in their project was an essential component of our initial planning. Students who use their authentic voices are seen to “make themselves visible and authors of their own world” (Elsworth, 1989). The fact that we intentionally did this is recognition that our students learn at different levels and different paces, with multiple ways of viewing and seeing the world (Stachowicz, 2012). The ‘performance’ in the form of a role play on our Mock United Day gave our students a voice, and the choice of their country demonstrated aspects of a negotiated curriculum.
- 3. Driving Question** – This project was open-ended to engage students and get them to become experts in the craft of inquiry. We asked ourselves essential

questions like: If students can Google an answer, what is the point? An objective of this project was to make students 'uncomfortable' give them an opportunity for 'messy' learning. Beane (2005) advocates that for students to think critically and democratically, "classrooms where teachers and students plan together, where projects are almost always underway, where new questions and problems are constantly arising, and where small and large groups are frequently in discussion often seem noisy, cluttered and even chaotic... the reason, of course, is that democracy is a "messy" business... it takes more time" (p. 122). We advocate that by providing students with avenues of self expression they are opening up spaces for them to have discussions on subjects that are normally ignored (Sammel & Martin, 2008).

4. **Reflection and Revision** – Reflection and revision of the driving question was the most important part of this project. Our students' growth in learning, and their understanding of what they were learning was strengthened through the reflection process. We think it is important that students understand ideas and perceptions can be changed throughout the learning process, and this was clearly evident in the reflections completed by the students. Jenny and I are advocates of transformative learning, we work together "as engaged and transformative intellectuals – professionals who reflect the pedagogical principles that inform their practice, connect pedagogical theory and practice to wider social issues, and work together to share ideas, exercise power over the conditions of their labor, and embody in their teaching a vision of a better and more humane life. (Giroux, cited in Kincheloe et al., 1992, pp. 34-35). Knowing

and understanding the Syrian crisis, as an example, has helped shaped our students' knowledge and understanding about the world they live in. I think this is best expressed through the views of the students:

*When asked to identify if any Member States had different opinions to their country, we received reflections like:*

*Student # 1*

*Lots of different member states had different views to my own during the Syria and Iraq resolution. Some countries were saying that they would not house refugees, they would not send military reinforcement and they would not get involved at all. I think this is because their country was further away from the targeted areas. (Abigail Bagley, 2015)*

*Student # 2*

*My experiences representing Canada on the Security Council were fantastic. I felt confident standing up in front of the Security Council and presenting my resolutions on behalf of Canada. It was an honour to be representing such a beautiful country and working in conjunction with other western states including the United States and Australia. Other nations listened carefully, and respected my opinions/resolutions which were mainly to assist and fund these solutions... There were no resolutions that I was surprised by as my member state, partially because I contributed to them. As a council, we were uncertain in that military action is the right thing to do, however, we came to a conclusion in that we should support Turkey in their refugee crisis, Canada, partially responsible for this decision. (Cameron Kinsella, 2015)*

We would like to end in hope, hope that teaching against the grain, using project based learning to transform the classroom and the learning experiences of our students has the potential to shape the world through the creation of change agents. This is no better epitomised than through the words of Brian Shultz in 'Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way':

*Realising classroom democratic ideals may raise more questions than answers...I would like to believe that all students should have space to be thinkers, doers, designers, and builders, challenging the ideological dominance of standardisation, accountability and high-stakes measures. I want to believe that if enough teachers look to their students for what is worthwhile, society as a whole can begin to make our world a better place. I strongly believe that teachers, along with their students, can construct meaningful curricula to challenge inequalities and provide opportunities. Much can be gained through individual experimentation with democratic and justice-orientated teaching, and great reflection, change and transformation can result (Shultz, 2008, p. 155).*