

Guidance on teaching about 9/11 as a sensitive and controversial issue

Why teach about 9/11? Teaching about the events and aftermath of 9/11 can be challenging for a number of reasons. Research carried out for SINCE 9/11 showed that both teachers and students have varying degrees of knowledge about 9/11, with some knowing very little at all. On top of that, many of the issues are complex and some are controversial, all of which adds to the potential demands made on teachers.

Some teachers surveyed expressed concerns about how to deal with the expression of Islamophobia, anti-American feeling or anti-Semitism, which they feared might arise from teaching about 9/11. Others were anxious about arousing the sensitivities of Muslim students or provoking strong views from students with a close connection to the Armed Forces. Many were also concerned about how they might teach aspects of 9/11 to classes containing Afghan students or others whose families have been impacted by the War on Terror.

However, nearly all the schools surveyed recognised the importance of 9/11 and its relevance to the lives of their students. They felt that their students should be helped to make sense of 9/11 and the events surrounding it, and that any misconceptions held about 9/11 should be challenged along with any stereotypes and prejudices about other cultures. Equally important was the need to provide opportunities for students to reflect on 9/11, look at what lessons can be learned and explore ways to make the world a better and safer place. Many schools welcomed the idea of a website containing classroom materials and guidance to support the teaching of 9/11, as they lacked the expertise to do this themselves.

The topic is divided into different stages rather than individual lessons. This ensures greater flexibility for teachers and takes account of the significant differences that exist in the length of lessons from school to school

Specific guidance about teaching 9/11

What makes this a sensitive and controversial topic?

What is not controversial about 9/11 is that on the morning of 11 September 2001, 19 hijackers took control of four airliners taking off from different airports in the USA. Two planes were deliberately crashed into the World Trade Center in New York, the third hit the Pentagon in Washington DC, and the final plane crashed en route to Washington after passengers on board had fought with the hijackers.

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This was and remains the biggest terrorist attack ever carried out on US soil and as a result, 2,977 people (excluding the hijackers) were killed. What is also not in doubt is that the 19 suicide terrorists were all from the Middle East and that al-Qaeda – an extremist Islamic terrorist organisation led by Osama bin Laden – admitted responsibility for organising the 9/11 attacks. 9/11 has also had worldwide repercussions, which continue to affect people's lives today.

However, the causes and aftermath of 9/11 can, if not handled with care, arouse sensitivities and provoke strong reactions. For example, the subsequent War on Terror in its various manifestations has been very controversial, and it is these areas that will need careful and sensitive handling as they are still the subject of intense debate. The proliferation of conspiracy theories on the internet also poses an additional challenge for teachers.

You can have every confidence about using the materials on the SINCE 9/11 website. They have been written by subject experts based on a wide range of evidence, trialled in schools, and reviewed by academics and teachers. They are specifically designed to support the teaching of all aspects of 9/11 and its aftermath.

Answering some of your questions about teaching 9/11

How do I deal with Islamophobia, anti-Semitism or anti-American feelings in my classroom?

Don't be afraid to challenge these views. If they are widely prevalent in your class, focus your lessons around the evidence to build up a broader and more balanced understanding of 9/11. Use this to help the students to develop reasoned arguments. Model this if necessary. Choose highly structured activities rather than discursive ones. Challenge stereotypes, e.g. make clear the distinction between Muslim extremists and Muslims; and where there is anti-American feeling, use case studies of the victims of 9/11 to counter this.

Won't learning about 9/11 reinforce the students' bias and misconceptions?

Start by finding out what your students know about 9/11. Build up their knowledge and understanding about 9/11 by introducing them to a range and variety of evidence. Avoid stereotyping and generalisations – show that aspects of 9/11 are complex and cannot be explained in simple terms. At the end, go back to their original misconceptions and ask the students to review these in light of their newly acquired knowledge and understanding. Show them how knowledge and reason can overcome bias and prejudice.

How do I tackle conspiracy theories about 9/11?

Use the approaches outlined in the answer to the question above. Counter conspiracy theories with evidence-based enquiry and be comfortable not giving much weight to these conspiracy theories. Don't allow them to dominate your lessons. See more detailed guidance [here](#).

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How do I teach 9/11 in an all-a school with large numbers of Muslim students?

This may be a particular challenge where Muslim students have encountered hostility as a result of some media coverage of 9/11 and other terrorist events. Some students may have developed strong or even extreme views as a result. In a potentially 'heated' environment such as this, start by taking a more measured approach to your teaching of 9/11 – use teacher exposition, structured activities and evidence-based enquiry. Use examples that are impersonal, such as case studies that are far removed from the students' own experiences. Only open up some of the issues raised when you begin to feel more confident. Model reason and respectful argument. Provide opportunities for the students to share some of their own experiences and feelings. Try to ensure that the student discussion does not reduce to a polarised debate between Islamic and non-Islamic positions. Try to focus on the positive – what can we learn from 9/11? How can we make the world a better place for everybody? See additional advice below on ways to deal with extreme views.

How do I teach 9/11 in an all-white school?

It is important to avoid stereotyping and making generalisations. You may have to challenge inbuilt assumptions or prejudice. If so, counter this with evidence-based enquiry and reasoned argument. Equally challenging might be to help your students appreciate how the everyday lives of many ordinary Muslims in the UK and elsewhere changed as a result of 9/11 – consider using the examples from the SINCE 9/11 website of [Mohammad Razvi](#) in New York (see the Image & film bank) talking about their experiences to explore this further.

What do I do if a student says something that is inappropriate?

Don't be afraid to challenge views that are inappropriate. Make sure you don't isolate or humiliate the student, but it is important to isolate the views expressed – counter them with reasoned argument and evidence. If necessary, censor the student's opinion or close down the discussion entirely. Don't allow these views to dominate a lesson.

How do I counter students who hold extreme views?

Use the approaches outlined in the answer to the question above. If you are aware of this in advance, use a more structured approach to your teaching. Focus on building up the students' knowledge and understanding of 9/11 through evidence. Model reason and respectful argument. Concerns around a student's extreme views should always be referred to your Prevent lead who will be able to advise and support you.

What if my class has one student who is Muslim or whose family were impacted by the War on Terror?

Talk to the student beforehand – will lessons on 9/11 cause them discomfort or even distress? If necessary create a "safe" environment for them in the classroom – choose materials that are more impersonal such as case studies, and activities that are more structured. If you open up issues to class discussion, set out some ground rules around making reasoned arguments, showing respect for others and tolerating difference. Set up discussions using pairs and small groups rather than exposing students to the whole class. If in doubt, consult your senior leaders in the school.

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What do I do if one of my students has suffered the loss of a family member or friend in a terrorist attack, or encountered other examples of violent extremism in their own lives?

Follow the advice given in the answer to the previous question. If in doubt, consult your senior leaders in the school.

What do I do if some of my students have a close connection to the Armed Forces?

Follow the advice given in the answer to the earlier question about having one student who is Muslim or family who were impacted by the War on Terror. If in doubt, consult your senior leaders in the school.

How old do my students have to be before I can teach about 9/11?

Age is not necessarily an issue, but the students' maturity should be taken into account when planning your lessons. Schools have different views about when it is appropriate to introduce 9/11 to their students. With either younger or less-mature students, a more structured approach led by teacher presentation may be required.

What if I am not confident about teaching about 9/11?

The materials on the SINCE 9/11 website are designed to help you. There is detailed guidance for teachers, along with examples of lessons and resources designed to support the teaching of 9/11 across a range of subjects, tutor time and through school assemblies. Start by taking a more measured approach to your teaching – use teacher exposition, structured activities, and evidence-based enquiry. Only open up some of the more complex issues raised when you begin to feel more confident.

How do I mention 9/11 in my lessons without invoking Islamophobia?

It is impossible to teach about 9/11 without mentioning al-Qaeda. However, you can counter Islamophobia by challenging stereotypes and avoiding generalisations by making clear the distinction between Islamic extremists and Muslims. Familiarise yourself with some of the key teachings of the Qu'ran about tolerance and peace. Broaden your study by looking at examples of other terrorist acts that have been perpetrated by non-Muslims. Emphasise that many Muslims were victims of 9/11 too, and in the immediate aftermath leaders of Muslim countries and organisations from around the world were swift to condemn the attacks. Consider how the everyday lives of many ordinary Muslims in the UK and elsewhere have been affected as a result of 9/11.

Should I ask my students to look at al-Qaeda's motives as part of my lessons on 9/11?

This is appropriate in order to help students understand how to prevent this from happening again. It does not mean however that you are condoning the terrorists and you should make this clear. Use the materials on the SINCE 9/11 website to help your students build up a picture of some of the causes of 9/11 within a broad historical and global context.

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