The Past is Present: Teaching 9/11 in a Changing World

Megan Jones

“How many of you remember where you were on 9/11?” Over 50 hands rose into the air. “How many of you teach students who have a memory of the attacks?” Not a single hand rose. These questions, posed to over 50 teachers gathered at the 9/11 Memorial Museum in New York City at the start of a professional development workshop, illustrate one of many challenges educators face when tackling 9/11 in the classroom. How do we impart the significance of 9/11 to a generation with no living memory of it, while underscoring its ongoing relevance today? The answer requires providing students with multiple entry-points into the 9/11 narrative so they can discover for themselves how the events of 16 years ago have a profound effect on the world they will soon inherit. A new exhibition at the 9/11 Memorial Museum offers a framework for initiating these conversations in the classroom.

“Cover Stories: Remembering the Twin Towers on The New Yorker” is a new exhibition of 33 covers from the weekly news and culture magazine that serve as a lens into the difficult and, at times, seemingly overwhelming task of teaching 9/11. To accomplish this goal, the education department created inquiry-based activities connected to select covers that spark student curiosity and offer an entry-point into specific themes that include the history of the World Trade Center, the events of 9/11, and the repercussions of the attacks. By challenging students to think critically about contemporary issues and situating them within the historical context of 9/11, they have the opportunity to discover the link between the pre-and post-9/11 world. Issues addressed in these lessons include the shifting balance between national security and civil liberties and the rise of Islamophobia. The following activities were piloted with high school students and educators from across the country—the results demonstrated the intricate relationship between the past and present.

Holiday Travel
In January 2017, students participating in the Repercussions workshop at the 9/11 Memorial Museum—a school program that asks students to consider the many ways the country has changed in a post-9/11 world—began identifying the recently released Presidential Executive Order banning citizens of seven Muslim-majority countries from entering the United States for 90 days as a repercussion of 9/11. This order highlights two significant points: that the balance of national security and civil liberties guaranteed by the Constitution...
continues to shift in the aftermath of 9/11 (as it had previously); and that this is an issue students are thinking about today.

The New Yorker cover published on December 3, 2001, entitled “Holiday Travel,” provides a lens into this complicated balance by asking students to consider the contrast between the pre- and post-9/11 approach to security. It features Santa Claus anxiously passing through security while his bag of toys is scanned. At first glance, students immediately identified Santa Claus, observed how nervous he appeared, and noted the people staring at him throughout the screening process. When asked what they thought this magazine cover said about the mood of the country immediately following 9/11, students remarked that people must have been scared for their safety, to the point that everyone—even Santa—was subject to suspicion.

While these were the expected responses, one question did surprise us. When asked what location the magazine cover depicted, the students were silent. Finally, one student cautiously raised her hand and responded with uncertainty, “The airport?” This group of high school students—too young to remember the attacks—struggled because the scene depicted is now ubiquitous. Many schools, museums, and government buildings require a security screening. These students did not know a time when going through metal detectors was not commonplace. The activity concluded with a group dialog during which the students asserted that 9/11 changed the national conversation about security, raising constitutional issues that continue to be debated in 2017.

What So Proudly We Hailed

I have personally been affected by racism ... when a man yelled at my Pakistani friend and me by shouting that we should “return to our own country” and that “America doesn’t need people like us around.

My friends that wear a hijab, or a religious head scarf, have been called a “terrorist” on the streets because of the Muslim symbol they were wearing.

These statements represent two of the hundreds of similar responses that applicants have offered when asked to describe why they want to participate in the 9/11 Memorial Museum’s Ambassador program—a year-long, competitive after-school program for high school students. They want to understand the role that 9/11 has played in their or their friends being treated differently simply because of religion, and what they can do to activate change. According to FBI data, hate crimes against Muslims rose significantly in 2001 and, while declining in subsequent years, the numbers have never returned to pre-9/11 levels.2 While 9/11 is not the only factor in the rise of hate crimes against Muslims, the data clearly indicates that the attacks served as a significant turning point. More recently, 8 in 10 educators reported heightened anxiety on the part of marginalized students,
including Muslim students, according to a study published in November 2017 by the Southern Poverty Law Center of over 10,000 K-12 educators. Together, these factors underscore the importance of exploring 9/11 as a turning point that continues to shape our world.

In November 2001, The New Yorker published a cover entitled “What So Proudly We Hailed,” featuring a man driving a New York City taxicab that was covered in American flags and other patriotic symbols. This cover serves as the catalyst into an examination with students of identity and stereotypes against Muslim Americans in the wake of 9/11. The goal of the activity is to introduce students to the additional fear and anxieties after the attacks felt by American citizens of Middle Eastern and South Asian descent, who worried about being perceived as terrorists based solely on their appearance. To accomplish this, students are challenged to consider how 9/11 shaped perceptions of Muslim Americans—and those perceived to be Muslim—and if those perceptions continue today.

When the activity was piloted with a group of 36 teachers from across the country—rural Kansas to Boston—the results were powerful. They began by viewing a TED Talk video clip of a Muslim American woman, Dahlia Mogahed, sharing her experience of going from “citizen to suspect” on September 11, 2001. They were then given copies of the November 2001 New Yorker cover, with the publication date purposely hidden, and asked to make observations. Teachers immediately began describing the man on the cover as nervous, anxious, and Muslim, which they attributed to his clothing. They also pointed out the abundance of flags and patriotic symbols on his taxicab. When asked when they thought the cover was published, their answers varied widely. Some suggested February 1993 (the first time the World Trade Center was attacked), some thought 9/11, some answered 2017. It was in that moment that they understood why the date was initially withheld, it was the key to the entire inquiry. This cover, published in 2001, could just as easily appear on The New Yorker today. The ensuing discussion ended with one teacher sharing how difficult life was for her—a Sikh, U.S. citizen, from Southeast Asia—after 9/11.

In the moment that followed, a fellow teacher took her hand and stated softly, “Thank you.”

The questions posed in these two activities are different than ones we were asking three years ago when the Museum opened and in the immediate aftermath of the attacks. In that sense, they speak more to who we are today than who we were 16 years ago—helping students discover the ongoing relevance of 9/11. To explore the full set of online activities based on “Cover Stories: Remembering the Twin Towers on The New Yorker” visit: 911memorial.org/lesson-plans-cover-stories.

Notes

9/11 Anniversary in the Schools Webinar

The 9/11 Memorial Museum invites teachers and students to participate in Anniversary in the Schools, a free webinar commemorating the 16th anniversary of 9/11.

Participants will be introduced to exhibitions within the Museum, learn about 9/11 through personal stories from a first responder, a survivor, and family member, and be given the opportunity to ask questions through a live chat with Museum staff. The webinar will introduce students to:

Alison Crowther, mother of Welles Crowther, who gave his life helping others escape on 9/11 and later became known as “The Man in the Red Bandana;

Bill Spade, retired FDNY firefighter from Rescue 5 in Staten Island who responded to the World Trade Center on 9/11;

Tom Canavan, a securities specialist working in the North Tower on 9/11 who survived the collapse and now works with Strength to Strength, an organization that brings victims of terrorism and their families together from around the world;

The 45-minute program will be broadcast on Monday, September 11, 2017, throughout the day and will be available online after that date. To register, visit 911memorial.org/webinar. The webinar will be interpreted in American Sign Language and captioned.

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