

Cardboard City

***And other stories for teaching issues about poverty
And social Justice***

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***(This sample contains the introduction, lesson one and some
reactions from pupils to the lesson.)***

Cardboard City ***Teaching about world poverty***

Teaching about poverty effectively, ie changing pupils' attitude depends on enabling them to *feel* something of the injustice of the unequal distribution of the world's resources. Young people have a strong sense of justice and concern for rights. Often it does not extend beyond themselves. Our task is to help them apply that to a world beyond their own. In their world the poor might be seen as

- lazy
- bringing the situation on themselves
- could get work if they tried
- prefer to live off handouts
- Should stay in their own country
- should be looked after by their own government

This is a defence mechanism. Pupils, like many adults, including ourselves, are trying to keep themselves safe - it is so much more comfortable to believe the "Big Issue" seller brought his homelessness on himself and therefore does not deserve our help.

Our aim therefore should go *beyond* the acquisition of knowledge and understanding about the causes and possible solution to world poverty and the Christian response to it. Our aim should be go deeper than that. It should be to move the pupils sufficiently that they take action in their own lives, however small, to eradicate poverty, rather than add to the problem.

The academic knowledge is, of course, essential to this process, both to pass an examination and also to fully understand the issues that we are grappling with. Experience shows me that it will not, on its own, change the way pupils think, feel and subsequently, behave.

Hitting the spiritual target

We do this when we go behind the knowledge and information and affect pupils, touch them, move them, shock them, make them angry about the inequality and injustice in our world. The way we do this is through recreating that in the classroom. We do this by confronting them in a very personal way with "This could be you!" and if it was

- Do you deserve this ?
- Is this your fault ?
- Is there something you could have done to avoid it ?
- How can you change the situation you are in ?
- What is the real cause of what is happening to you ?

And finally and most importantly

- If this really was you, what might you do and what choices might you make in order to stay alive ?

It addresses the universal spirituality because it is about empathy, compassion and fundamental human rights. It aims to change the *attitude* of the pupils so that they are moved to take *action* in their own lives, but, it also addresses *reason* and *rationality* in that the consequences of injustice and inequality in the end affect us *all* in the wider consequences of crime, violence, world health, refugees, and global economics

I approach this topic therefore, not through knowledge facts and information, but through creating a series of experiences which can take pupils into *feelings* about injustice, deprivation, suffering and most importantly the poverty trap. They need to experience the sheer frustration of not being able to get out of the situation and of having no control over their lives. During the next few lessons I will discuss how to

- Create a street scene in India full of rubbish, noise, smell and intense heat. Pupils have to find food and water and create some sort of shelter for themselves from the sun
- Create an area in London where the homeless live. It is dark and bitterly cold. Pupils have to decide how to stay warm and dry and find food. They need to decide how they are going to get out of the situation
- Use life histories of various characters, which they then become, while the rest of the class ask them questions about what has happened to them, how it feels and how they plan to free themselves from the situation. Helps pupils understand the perils of globalisation, free trade versus fair trade and allows

them to explore the question of whether making a profit is always justifiable as a reason for rendering people unemployed.

- Use “The wheel of fate” to help pupils realise that even they are not immune to sudden changes in circumstance and their consequences .Helps pupils deal with the defense mechanism “its their own fault”
- Use the Lantern Factory to enable pupils to experience the difficulties of trade with unequal resources.
- Use the north/south divide activity to help pupils feel how unequally the worlds resources are distributed.

Lesson one – Car Park in Calcutta

I got the idea for this lesson while preparing a course for a new examination syllabus on wealth and poverty. I found the examination questions dry and uninspiring.

“Describe the work of a Christian agency working to relieve poverty. What Christian teaching inspires them to do this work? Can a person be a good Christian and wealthy? ”.

Teaching to the exam was not going to change attitudes but doing that *after* experiential lessons would bring the Christian teaching and the work of agencies alive.

When I described to my colleague, Julie, the scene I planned to create, she said “I have seen a place like that. It is in the car park opposite the station in Calcutta. Beggars live there with their children. Trying to make shelters to keep them out of the sun. They have nothing . They scavenge on the floor of the market for food”. So that is what I set out to create in my classroom.

I was preparing the course during the Christmas holiday and while shopping I came across an ex pupil who was serving in a shop. She asked me how RE was going and if I was still teaching experientially with sets and music. “RE rocked !” she said “I remember it more than anything else I studied.” I told her what I was working on, whereupon she told me that she had just returned from traveling and had seen the kind of scenes I described. “Do you know” she said “I have even seen mothers pouring petrol on their children and burning them so that their injuries get more sympathy from the tourists” and so the story of Sarita in the car park in Calcutta was born.

It proved to be highly effective, eliciting comments from the children such as “Miss, I had no idea “ “I knew the statistics but now I have thought about they feel and I want to do something about it “ “It makes me so angry and sad .Why isn’t something being done ?” “I will feel differently now when I walk past someone in the street”

This is what you need to create a street scene in India

These lessons are particularly effective in the winter when you can dramatically alter the temperature of the classroom.

What you are aiming for is to create an area in a city where homeless people are trying to survive. Pupils will enter a classroom which you can adapt to a greater or lesser degree, depending on the time and resources available.

If you are on the move a bin bag of carrier bags, bin bags and news paper will do, plus a bowl and some water .If you can manage a CD player and some music it would help, but it is not essential.

Pupils will come into a classroom strewn with rubbish blowing about on the street plus cardboard, flat or in box form. By the end of the lesson they will have made themselves shelters to live in and will finish with a visualisation taking them into the experience

If you can create the sound effects of a city street with cars honking, lorries going past which you can play loudly on a loop, so much the better, or you may wish to use dramatic and discordant music. The soundtrack from "Heat" is good. The beginning of the sound track from Baz Lurhman's "Romeo and Juliet" would also do. The sound track from Ry Cooder's "Paris, Texas" has a bleakness that would be appropriate.

If you are feeling brave, you could also re create the smell using the water from dead flowers or some rotting fish or stale cabbage that you have specially prepared.

Lesson Recipe for Car Park in Calcutta

This is what you do

- Class enter a normal classroom but with rubbish strewn everywhere .
- There are bin bags ,carrier bags, cardboard boxes.
- The inner tubes from rolls of wrapping paper make useful struts for roofs
- There is fabric. Old sheets or Saris would be useful.
- There is string and pebbles which can be used in the construction later.

- In the middle there is a container of water. It might be a cut off plastic milk container, a foil container that has been thrown away, A bucket or a washing up bowl. This will be the water for that community. You might add some containers from rubbish that each family could use to collect water.
- On the side you could have a glass container with water from a puddle to show the pupils their water might not be clean.
- To the side, also, you could have some rice on cut up carrier bags and some small piles of coloured spices. This represents the spilled rice and left overs from the market which Sarita will gather to sell in the story.

1. Pupils sit in a circle round the set.

Introducing poverty in India

Today we are going to explore what it might be like to be someone very different from ourselves. We are going to use our imaginations to try to get inside that experience

I am going to tell you a story . It is *your* story. This is who you are and why you are in the place you are in now. Once you have entered into the world of this person I will set you role playing. The aim of the role play is to enable you to stay alive .

Sarita's story.

"My name is Sarita. I live in India in Calcutta with my husband and our three children. We came here from our village when cattle sickness took away our living. My husband got a job in the factory . Things were not too bad. We had a nice apartment and that was when we had the three children. Two years ago he caught his hand in the machinery. His right hand was amputated. The factory gave him some compensation which kept us going while he recovered but they could not keep him on. He was useless. He lost his job and cannot find more work. He cannot even sweep the streets . We could not pay the rent and so yesterday we had to leave our apartment. We have been forced to come here to live on the streets.

There is an area where several families live. I used to walk past it every day on the way to buy food from the market. They make shelters to protect themselves from the sun . This is where they live. This is what we will have to live , now.

It is hard to find clean water . We share what we can get from a bucket in the middle. It is all several families have for washing, cooking and drinking. We get a little food from the bins at the market when it closes. They throw out the vegetables and fruit which are not fresh enough to sell. I sweep up the grains of rice which are spilled when the stall owner packs up . On a good day, when I can spare some of this food, I will sell it on the street nearby to people who cannot afford the market prices. On other days we will join my husband begging near the station. There are so many of us we do not get much .We are always hungry. I worry about the children getting sick. Sometimes the water is not clean. Our food is never fresh. My husband hopes that his hand will draw sympathy from the tourists. Some of the women poured petrol on their children and burned them on their arms or even their faces to get more money. At least his injury meant we did not have to make that choice

3. Ask the pupils to form groups who are Sarita and her family. Set the pupils to construct shelters from the rubbish available in the classroom. They can have string and pebbles and pieces of wire to fasten bits together but no sellotape . It must be just what they would find on the street .

4. While they are building you could turn on an extra fan heater to try and make the room uncomfortably hot. You could also remove the lid on a plastic container of rotten fish.

5. Once the shelter is built they need to get inside it and plan how they are going to get food and water. How are they going to survive?

10 –15 minutes before the end of the lesson when everyone is inside their shelter ask the children to reflect in silence that on the other side of the world people are really living in conditions like this and they are not sitting on a smooth classroom floor waiting for a bell to go so that they can eat .

Interview pupils in role about their situation.

- What are the problems that face them every day?
- How do they find food and water ?
- How are they going to get out of the situation?

De brief/plenary: Explore the questions below as a class. Asking pupils to describe and reflect on the lesson at home should produce some thoughtful responses which will enable them to engage with and understand the material they will need to know for their examination later.

- Who are they ?
- What happened to them how did it feel ?
- What put them in that situation ?
- How will they get out ?

Pupils are particularly shocked by the mothers burning their children. I ask them to consider, rather than judging them, what could be so terrible that they would feel forced to do this.

It is particularly helpful to bring the discussion to a point where the pupils say “It couldn’t happen here because we have social security and Raoul would get disability benefit” . This enables you to consider **relative** poverty which is found in the developed world, as opposed to **absolute** poverty, which is found in the developing world.

I was particularly pleased when my pupils took up this theme and declared confidently that “winos, alkie, tramps and the homeless “ that they see frequently wrapped in sleeping bags in shop doorways begging for change “ deserved no sympathy because their situation was their fault”. It made an ironic starting point for the next lesson, cardboard city, a scene in London where the homeless live under Waterloo bridge.

Homework: Ask pupils to keep a diary of the experiences they are facing during this unit of work.

Here are some comments from pupils following the lesson. These reactions to the experiential lessons on poverty in India and England reflect the entire ability range

I realised that on the other side of the world this is actually happening to some people. I would hate for it to happen to me, I wouldn't know what to do or where to go for help. I feel bad for the people this is happening to and want to know why it isn't being stopped.

Jack age 16

When I was in the experiential lesson it made me feel empathy for the woman Mrs Phillips role played. I realised how lucky I am compared to the people played in the experiential lessons. It made me think about what I would do if I was in their position.

Helen age 16

It made me feel bad because it wasn't their fault they were so poor

James age 16

In the lesson about poverty my eyes were opened to how it would feel and the everyday problems that the poor in the world face. It made me think about how I would deal with these problems and why some people resort to some extreme things to survive

Josie age 16 (very able student)

When I heard the story I felt sad and upset. I was angry. I felt very sad that they didn't have the life I had. I also felt guilty because I had so much and Sarita had nothing. When we acted out the part about living on the street it made me feel different about the way I see them.

Samantha age 16 (non reader dictating to her teaching assistant)

I feel that with all the money in the world someone would have tried to help. If I was in their shoes I would be terrified.

Dean age 16

I felt I was listening to a woman who actually lived this life. This changed what I felt before because I'd always known poverty as figures rather than people. I imagined myself in her position and it disturbed me to think people live like this, it made me want to help.

Abbie age 16

When you learn how poverty is defined in another culture, it makes you grateful for what you have

Mark age 16

Even though I might be having a really bad day I still have food money and a place to live. I learned all the different things that happen to people to make them poor. It made me think about the things we could do and I think we should do something about it.

Rebecca age 16

What I realised was that being able to experience someone else's life shows you that there are poorer people than you see on the streets of Britain and that people that poor would be willing to harm their child just to get food for them. This made me feel anger and guilt that more isn't being done to help them. The story will make me think differently next time I walk past somebody in the street.

Cory age 16

At the end of the lesson I felt sad and guilty because whilst we are helping ourselves to food from the cupboards people on the other side of the world are struggling to survive

Amanda age 16

I think the poverty lesson helped in two ways. Firstly I think the lesson helped people to realise how bad a lot of people's quality of life actually is and this in turn made people realise how lucky they are and how good our quality of life is

David age 16 (very able student)

It made me feel that even the richest or poorest people can have their lives change in an instant. It made me feel that people have to give up everything just to stay alive where as before they didn't really pay attention to the beggars now they are and so their attitudes change and they know they are just like the others.

Ben age 16

What I learned was how easily you can lose everything. It is really upsetting the way she lives. She just leaves her baby in the shade where anyone could steal it. She does not know where her next meal is coming from. I realised how well off I am and it made me feel sad and want to help those who do not have a lot.

Becky age 16

I realised that some of the people who are homeless make something out of nothing. They make do with what they've got.

Sara age 16

This piece of work was very powerful as it makes me think about all the young people of this world who have absolutely nothing. I feel we should do something. When I listened to what our teacher says about the pain and hunger the people go through it makes me feel sick and light headed.

Abi age 16 dictating to her teaching assistant.