

# Educating for Peace and Understanding: *Face to Faith in America's schools*

Charles C. Haynes

Samantha Reynolds is living her dream. In the summer of 2012, she accepted a job teaching social studies at Chantilly High School in Fairfax County, Virginia—fulfilling her lifelong goal of becoming an educator.

First-year teachers are often backbenchers, reluctant to lead the way in a building filled with veterans. Not Sam. Determined to find creative ways to connect her students with the world using technology, Sam prepared for her first year by mapping out her two sections of World Religions using Face to Faith, an innovative program offered free to schools by the Tony Blair Faith Foundation. The Foundation was established to promote respect and understanding between major religions and to help prevent religious prejudice, conflict, and extremism.

Using videoconferencing and online community, Face to Faith enables students from across the globe to learn from, with, and about one another. In the 2013–2014 school year, students between the ages of 12 and 17 in nearly 100 schools in the United States are connecting directly with their peers in more than 20 countries.

Fortunately for Sam, Chantilly High School already had experience with Face to Faith because of Kathy Wildman, an outstanding social studies educator who was the first teacher in the Washington, D.C., region to adopt the program. After Kathy moved to Boston in 2012, she offered support and advice to Sam on ways to integrate Face to Faith into the curriculum.

## **Engaging in Respectful Dialogue**

It all starts with teaching students how to engage people of different religions and cultures with civility and respect. The first teaching module of Face to Faith—and the only module required of teachers using the program—uses cooperative learning techniques to practice active listening and respectful dialogue essential for civil discourse. With these skills, students are prepared for a meaningful exchange of values and beliefs, not only during videoconferences, but also in daily class discussions and in a secure online learning community.

By focusing on civil dialogue, Face to Faith empowers young people with the ability to understand and respect different perspectives about religion and, importantly, to resist extremist voices. Direct encounters between students with very different cultures and beliefs put a human face on the “other.”

Early in her first semester in the classroom, Sam (Ms. Reynolds to the students) prepared her students for a videoconference with two schools in New Delhi, India. She had already communicated with the Indian teachers about the curricula goals of the first videoconferences, timed to coincide with the Hinduism unit in her World Religions course. Not surprisingly, the teachers were looking for similar outcomes such as improved civil discourse skills, understanding of different values and beliefs, and appreciation for religious and cultural diversity.

On the day of the first videoconference, Sam arrived at school early to make sure

there were no technological glitches. The Tony Blair Faith Foundation's technology team, working with the school's technology director, had tested everything in the weeks leading up to the videoconference.

“When my students arrived,” Sam later recalled, “their usual boisterous banter was silenced. They shifted in their seats anxiously. But once they could see the students in the other room across the world doing the same thing, their anxiety decreased.”

During the videoconference itself, teachers step back and students take center stage. Although an experienced facilitator is provided by Face to Faith to keep the dialogue focused, students are encouraged to speak directly with one another about issues that matter.

According to Sam, “the hour of dialogue flew by as the students had to step outside their comfort zones and engage students from a very different culture.” Immediately afterwards, the students were already asking, “When can we do this again?” and saying “I have more questions.”

During a discussion about the meaning of service that took place between a school in Utah and a school in India, an Indian student said, “It's good to know that you do service projects in your community, but does your faith or peer pressure play a bigger role in motivating you?” In a recent videoconference about working for world peace, one student asked, “How do you make peace with yourself?”

In a videoconference with students



Students at Chantilly High School videoconference with students in Morelia, Mexico, about the purpose of festivals in society, October 2013.

in Lebanon, there was a wide-ranging discussion about the meaning of compassion. Students shared what it was like to see acts of compassion within their communities and discussed what it means to be compassionate. They explored the issue of whether compassion was something that occurred because of nature or nurture, what the motivation was for compassion, and if compassion was something they all had in common.

After a videoconference encounter, students can ask additional questions and deepen connections through a secure online learning community, created as a safe space for students to participate in discussion forums, plan joint projects for tackling issues of shared concern, and, in other ways, stay in touch with students from around the world.

### Learning about Religions and Cultures

Subsequent teaching modules focus on global issues such as the environment, poverty and wealth, and the art of expression, with considerable content on how various faiths and cultures address these topics. Teachers are given a menu of options for integrating the modules into

their geography, history, civics or other social studies courses.

Face to Faith enables teachers to deepen study about religions while simultaneously addressing topics that are frequently discussed in the social

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studies. It's easy to see how Samantha Reynolds's use of Face to Faith is a natural fit for teaching world religions. During the course of her first year, Sam's students engaged students in India, Pakistan, Lebanon, and Italy in ways that supported and enriched learning about the world's major faiths.

Other social studies teachers have had equally positive experiences integrating

Face to Faith into geography, world history, government and other courses. Some teachers have even created a Face to Faith student club, giving students additional opportunities to connect with their peers in various parts of the world.

In American public schools, Face to Faith is implemented in ways that uphold First Amendment principles and guidelines. Teachers using Face to Faith are neutral toward religion—neutral among religions and neutral between religion and non-religion—when teaching about faiths and beliefs. Students, of course, are free to express their views about religion, including their personal beliefs, as long as it is relevant to the discussion.

### Implementing Common Core Standards

It is important to note that Face to Faith reflects a number of the key principles for effective social studies education found in the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies. The introductory module of Face to Faith, for example, includes analytical guides that address the evaluation of visual information including intercultural encounters through visual media (“An Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters through Visual Media”).

In the Environment module, there are video clips of people from different faith and belief perspectives discussing their environmental activism. Students are instructed to listen, watch and note the issues and the key reasons people are committed to addressing them.

The Wealth, Poverty, and Charity, and Environment modules include teachings from various faith traditions' primary source documents (scriptures). Students are asked to evaluate the teachings for key ideas and to provide an accurate summary. Each module contains activities and resources for analyzing various sources on a single subject (e.g., comparing different media accounts of Princess Diana's death) and recognizing the tools of propaganda.

## Getting Involved with Face to Faith

Face to Faith is free to all schools. Teachers can register their schools to participate in Face to Faith at [www.facetofaithonline.org](http://www.facetofaithonline.org).

To learn more about how the program is working throughout the world, visit, [www.tonyblairfaithfoundation.org](http://www.tonyblairfaithfoundation.org) and select the Face to Faith icon on the home page.

Kristen Looney, U.S. coordinator for Face to Faith may be reached by writing to [Kristen.looney@tonyblairfaithfoundation.org](mailto:Kristen.looney@tonyblairfaithfoundation.org)

### Empowering Student Voice

As important as learning about religions and cultures is in Face to Faith, the primary aim of the program is to educate for peace and understanding by empowering student voice. Direct dialogue with peers in other countries about their values and beliefs enables students to break down barriers, dispel stereotypes and build respect for others.

Rathna Muralidharan, a student in Ms. Reynolds' first year class, describes the impact of Face to Faith this way:

What I most enjoyed was getting to see the world through another person's eyes and experience their culture and heritage through them. Out of all the videoconferences I participated in, I enjoyed our session with the school in Lebanon the most because the topics we covered were so varied and the students had taken off time from their schedules to talk to us after their school was over, despite the dangerous situation that put them in. I believe it to be an excellent tool in connecting us to peers on a global scale, as well as teaching us how to communicate with people in a respectful manner while keeping our minds open to views that are different from our own.

Like many students who participate in Face to Faith, Rathna was changed by the experience:

Participating in the Face to Faith program has inspired me to learn more about different cultures and played a very large role in my

decision to pursue International Affairs as a major in college and eventually get a job promoting respect and understanding for different heritages and cultures.

Another of Ms. Reynolds' students, Aish Iyer, describes Face to Faith "as one of the best experiences of my high school career." She goes on to explain the impact of the program on her life:

Face to Faith gave me a safe place to explore my curiosity about other cultures, because I had my teachers and peers (all of whom were just as interested as I was), and because the people we spoke to were open minded and ready to discuss topics that aren't typical conversation starters. It made me realize that in the end, religion isn't as scary a topic as everyone makes it out to be. More importantly, it gave me hope for a more peaceful world—a world filled with peaceful discussion, be it with my peers or between governments.

As these student reflections suggest, Face to Faith gives students a meaningful voice in their own education. The program provides the technological tools and pedagogical framework for encouraging robust, but civil, exchanges among students across the world about issues they care deeply about.

### Supporting teachers

As already noted—but it bears repeating—Face to Faith is provided to schools at no cost. This includes an experienced

facilitator for videoconference sessions, tech support for making the videoconference connections, teaching modules with collaborative learning techniques, and a moderated website for student and teacher interaction.

It also includes a commitment by the Tony Blair Faith Foundation to support teachers by offering professional development. Face to Faith provides teacher training workshops, which concentrate on pedagogy. Online resources include teacher training videos, special teacher-only videoconferences each month, and a "teacher discussion forum" in the online community.

Many regions of the United States have Face to Faith Lead Teachers, experienced practitioners who are implementing Face to Faith and are available to support colleagues interested in adopting the program. In addition, the U.S. coordinator for Face to Faith, Marcia Beauchamp, and the other members of the Face to Faith team are available to give advice and support.

### "What More Could You Want?"

At the end of her first year teaching, Sam was asked to reflect on the impact of Face to Faith in her classroom. Here is what she wrote: "I feel so fortunate to have found Face to Faith. It has made me a better teacher, and provided my students with more opportunities than I could have ever hoped to give them. I cannot wait to begin to schedule my conferences for next year, and share the experiences with my freshman world history classes." Sam added that two of her students had switched their intended college majors to international affairs and others had shared with her that the experience of Face to Faith changed their lives. "What more could you want as an educator?" she asked. 🌍

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