

THREE FAITHS FORUM



Activities for Interfaith Week 2009

The [Three Faiths Forum](#) (3ff) is one of the leading interfaith organisations in the UK. The forum has a strong educational programme, delivering daily programmes in schools and colleges. Their work:

- supports learning about and learning from religions
- provides cross curricular opportunities (particularly citizenship education)
- helps schools fulfil their duty to promote community cohesion
- facilitates faith schools linking

In this resource, we will share some reflections on getting the most from speaking engagements in schools, as well as supporting schools to link with others.

Interfaith week is an opportunity to get across the “values of interfaith” as well as giving young people the opportunity to engage in a meaningful way with people of different faiths and beliefs. One method 3ff recommends is to organise speaking events in schools. Having a panel of presenters from different faiths/beliefs, rather than individuals speaking in different sessions, gives a powerful message of shared values for the activity.

N.B. As a non-religious organisation, 3ff are very careful that our presenters are not seen to be promoting religion or religious beliefs during sessions. One way we do this is to keep presentations very personal by using statements starting with “I” e.g. I believe that....

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PART 1: Running Interfaith Encounters

Introduction to the activity

3FF's "[Encountering Faiths](#)" programme brings guest presenters of different faiths or beliefs together with a group of young people. Presenters are invited to speak for 5-7 minutes, sharing their personal stories before inviting questions and conversation. This is an opportunity to share insights and personal experiences that young people would not learn from a text book or traditional RE lesson.

There is no one way of presenting on an interfaith panel.

- Some of our presenters prefer to speak specifically about their **faith**, essentially giving an introduction to the main tenets of Islam, Buddhism, Jainism etc.
- Others choose to illustrate their **faith journey**, i.e. the evolving relationship they have with their faith, often through a series of short stories.
- In our experience, the most effective presenters are those who include plenty of **personal experiences**.
- Each of us could talk about ourselves for hours, but it is important to **maintain focus**, and resist the temptation to ramble.

Encountering Faiths is...

- an opportunity for young people to have a **positive encounter** with a person of another faith, and to see people with different beliefs working together with a shared vision for harmony.
- a chance for young people to hear the presenters' **personal stories**, and so providing them with a living and memorable narrative rarely found in written resources
- a safe space for young people to **ask questions**.

Encountering Faiths is not...

- a platform for preaching and converting, whether for the presenters or participants
- an opportunity for presenters to voice their personal frustrations or issues with their or any other faith community
- a means of promoting 'faith' in general
- a debate between people of different beliefs (see "Dialogue not debate" below)

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Roles

The facilitator

We find it useful to have a facilitator acting in a neutral position i.e. not speaking from a particular perspective. This could be a teacher or someone from outside the school. The facilitator should be responsible for

- maintaining effective timekeeping
- clarifying something that had been said
- directing questions
- helping questioners ask better/more sensitive questions
- Eliciting guideline/rules for dialogue from the group

The presenters

- Are people from a faith community who volunteer to speak about their experiences
- Speak on behalf of themselves, not as “representatives” of their faith community
- Should be able to explain beliefs and practices from different denominations within their community
- Usually speak for 5-7 minutes, then take questions
- Are not obliged to answer any question they feel uncomfortable with
- Should be confident and engaging public speakers

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Creating a safe space - Rules for Dialogue

Ask the group to suggest rules for making sure everyone feels comfortable during the session. Each group is different, but you may want to include:

- Show respect to the opinions and beliefs of others
- Use “I” Statements - try not to generalise
- “Oops/ouch rule” – facilitated “time out”
If someone says something they don’t mean, it comes out wrong, or they would like to rephrase it, they say “oops!”
If someone is offended or hurt, they say “ouch!”
- Dialogue not debate – discussing the difference between these terms can people express personal opinions in the spirit of sharing and listening, without seeking to change other people’s minds.

Sensitive issues e.g. conflict & politics

It is up to you and the school to decide the extent to which the activity can be a space for political or conflict-focussed discussions. Sensitive questions regularly come up in secondary school activities and it requires strong facilitation.

- Be clear at the start of the session what the presenters are happy talking about
- If things get heated, remind everyone of the rules for dialogue and if necessary, pause the activity and talk about what is happening in the room
- There are no simple questions - the ones that appear straightforward are often the hardest to answer.
- Most questions are loaded with assumptions and misunderstandings that may need discussing.
- The students may need reminding that there are many different (and often conflicting) ways of seeing a situation, which lead to a variety of different truths, all of which may be valid

Questions to ask the school:

- **Length of session** – Ideally 45-60 minutes for secondary schools, 30-45 for Key Stage 2 in primary
- **How many students** – is it a classroom or assembly set-up?
- **Who are the students?** - Faiths/beliefs, ability levels, recent issues in the school, special educational needs
- **What age group** – is it one year group, or will it be a mix of ages?
- **What they have been learning in related subjects (RE/Citizenship/PSHE)**– having an idea of students’ knowledge will give you an idea how to pitch your presentations
- **A contact number** – teacher’s individual mobiles are useful if they’re happy to give it

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PART 2: Presentations

Tips for planning to speak:

a) Before the session

- **Decide on your message** – Think about what you want the “bottom line” or message of your presentation to be, e.g. “Loving your neighbour is important, especially when they are different to you.” Then build your speech from there.
- **Plan to talk for 5-7 minutes** – Brief is better. You can always resort to teasers like “You can ask me more about that later...”
- **Know your audience** – make it age appropriate, and think carefully about what young people will find engaging
- **Be selective** about what you include and what you leave out. You’ve only got 5-7 minutes!
- **Include “I statements”** – Keep it personal to avoid generalisation e.g. “I believe...” or “This is important to me...” as opposed to “All Christians believe...”
- **Beware of value judgements**
Presenters are not there to instruct young people how to live. It is important to differentiate between “I do this, and it is important to me because...” and “I do this, and you should do it too...”
- **Research diversity** – Find out about the beliefs and practices of different denominations in your faith community, so that you can show intra-faith diversity, e.g. “As a Reform Jew I think...but Orthodox Jews may think...”
- **Create a positive interfaith message**
Something may be “true”, but also unhelpful in trying to achieve the aims of the session. Think in terms of what is “helpful” towards creating understanding of difference, both interfaith and intra-faith. At 3FF we encourage presenters to reflect on whether their speech reflects our tagline: “Widening horizons, Confronting prejudice, Encouraging harmony”
- **Distinguish between Narrative & Testimony**
Speaking in an interfaith context is different from sharing a testimony. The focus of the presentation is not just to explain your relationship with your faith, though this will feature in your narrative.
- **Bullet points** – Condense your talk into short headings, as they are easier to read at a glance than lots of text

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b) During the session:

Check in with Facilitator

Make eye-contact with the facilitator while presenting to check how much time there is left, or if you feel uncomfortable and would like them to intervene. Facilitators are there to help.

Explain any faith-based jargon

Avoid 'jargon' that is used only by people within one particular faith community. Or if used, explain the word with language that is easy to understand.

Sweeping eye-contact

Throughout the talk, make eye contact with as many people in the room as possible - rather than just focussing on one or two individuals. During question time, don't just look at the questioner - address the response to the whole audience.

Enjoy yourself!

Presenting should be great fun!

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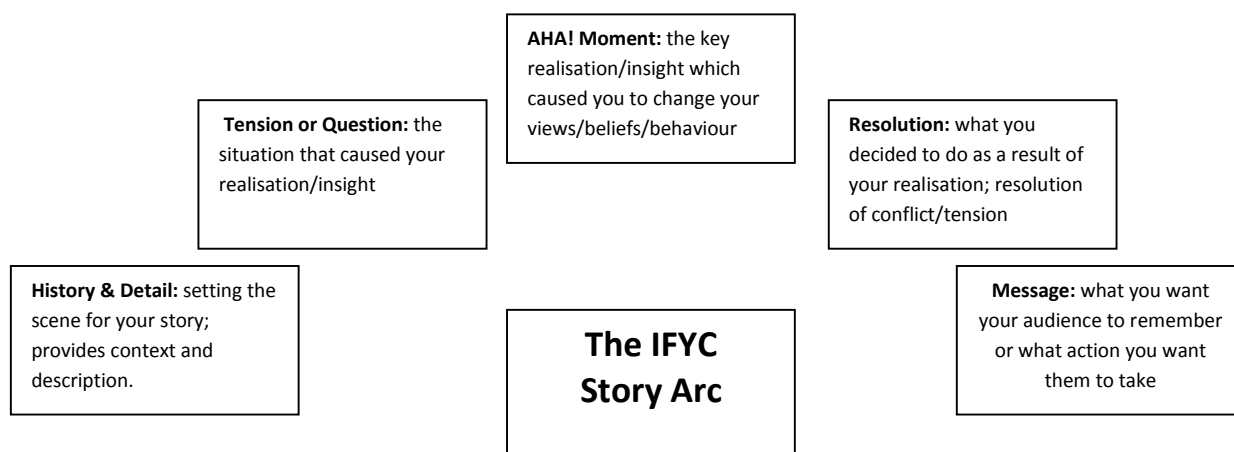
SHARING EXPERIENCES USING NARRATIVE

Presenters can consider using narrative techniques. They are powerful within interfaith contexts as they can:

- Humanise the other
- Serve as an accessible vehicle to explore subtle and complex ideas
- Deliver a powerful message in an engaging and memorable way

NB It is important not to confuse interfaith narrative with faith testimony. This is not a platform for conversion or persuasion, so be sure to choose your message with care.

[The Interfaith Youth Core](#), suggests a story arc for short, compelling interfaith stories. The arc centres around an “AHA! Moment”, or key realisation that prompts a change in thought, belief, behaviour, or all three. This can be to do with faith, e.g. “I realised that my faith was to take a different course to that of my parents,” or interfaith “I realised how similar my values were to those of my Hindu colleague.”



Questions to help you plan narrative:

Although the story should be told in the order detailed above, 3FF suggests that you first identify your “AHA! Moment” and “Message” in order to write your story. It is easier to build the other elements of the story with your realisation and message in mind.

“AHA MOMENT”

- What was your key realisation/insight?
- What were the implications of this insight? -

“MESSAGE” – “And so...”

- One-liner – what action would you like others to take as a result of your “AHA” moment?
- Which key message of your story would you most like to share with other people?

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“HISTORY & DETAILS” –

Where were you? When did the story take place?
What/who was important to you at the time?
What did you spend most of your time doing/thinking about?
How would you describe your faith at that time?

CONFLICT & TENSION –

Was there a particular conflict or question that you faced?
What emotions were you feeling?
What were the options that were available to you? E.g. “I could have...or ...” or “I felt torn between...and...”
NB Sketching out these options invites your audience into your story, and creates suspense which leaves them wanting more

RESOLUTION

What did you decide to do as a result of this experience?
How did your views change?

Finally, put your five components in the right order and practice it on willing friends or family.

Story Arc: Developed by [the Inter Faith Youth Core](#)

Questions: Devised by [St Ethelburga’s Centre for Peace & Reconciliation](#)

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PART 3: Questions

Role of facilitator

Question Time injects interactivity into an interfaith encounter, but it must be carefully facilitated to ensure that both “askers” and “askees” feel comfortable and safe. A reiteration of the ground rules by the facilitator is important before Question Time begins.

The facilitator should:

- **Be a teacher or appointed person other than the presenters**
- **Be neutral**, at least for the purposes of the session
- **Direct questions** from the floor
- **Feel confident** to
 - o Intervene
 - o Remind everyone of the ground rules
 - o Prevent anyone from speaking for too long
 - o Encourage quieter members of the group
 - o Ask participants or presenters to explain unfamiliar terms
- **Keep time**

Useful thinking questions

Remembering the ground rules:

- “You are doing so well at remembering our ground rules, let’s keep it up.”
- “What did we agree at the beginning about listening carefully; respecting each other; etc.?”

“Bounce back” questions - If a question is unclear or inappropriately phrased:

- “Can you explain what you mean by that?”
- “I see what you are trying to ask, but can you phrase it more specifically/respectfully?”
- “What makes you ask that question?”

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Dealing with sensitive or controversial questions

ASkeR - When someone asks a difficult or controversial question, the facilitator can help the individual/group explore what is contacted within the question. It serves as a “facilitated time out”.

Assumptions – What is the person asking the question assuming? Why might they assume that?

Statement or Question - Is the person asking a question, or telling us what they think?

Key words – What are the key words that betray incorrect assumption? Are there words we could be understanding differently?

Rephrase? – How does this question need to be rephrased more appropriately before it can be answered?

Responding to questions using ASKEE

Assume good intent - often questions that sound abrupt or rude come from genuine curiosity

Spectrum of views – include viewpoints from across your religious tradition to show diversity

Keep it short and sweet

Explain jargon/foreign words

End on a positive note – this keeps the tone optimistic, even when discussing thorny issues

AND:

Feel free to say “I don’t know”

If in doubt it is better to answer with “I’m not sure about that” or “We can find out for you” than making something up on the spot

Enjoy it