

Understanding Slavery Initiative

How can teachers handle working with objects of violence, and the emotional reactions some students may have to them? (Video transcript)

Speaker: Jean Campbell

Time-code	Speech
00:00:08	Transatlantic slavery is a brutal history. It represents both the worst and, at times, the best of humanity. And because of that, it throws up many emotive responses that need to be managed in all aspects of the session where you're using these objects. For a start-off, we need to think about the language that we use in relation to talking about the subject.
00:00:39	You may have already heard me use the word enslavement instead of talking about slaves, because sometimes it's a far better use of words. Because people aren't born often, they're not born as slaves, they are born into... enslavement is something that's done to them.
00:00:58	Another thing that happens when we talk, often, about this subject, is the word black and white is bandied about. It's very important that we make very direct use of the word Africa and Africans. This object, again, it comes from Africa, made by Africans. It's not an object just made by black people. We must be very specific.
00:01:21	It's absolutely essential that teachers spend some time before they work with this history with their students, be they education... teachers that are working in the museums, or teachers working in the classroom. They spend some time getting to know this history and really thinking about their own responses and reactions to it.
00:01:44	Because this will enable them to work more effectively with their students and to handle in a much more sensitive and sophisticated way the emotional responses that come up. Another thing we need to think about is the age of the students that we're working with. This subject is very... It can be upsetting, a lot of the objects. Some of the objects, like this one, for example.
00:02:15	It may seem strange. You may be curious about it, because you haven't seen it before. If I tell you some information about it, it'll help to explain why we need to be very considerate about the use of it. It is in fact a leg-iron, that would have been used to shackle an enslaved person on a slave ship. This is just one. There would have been up to 600. Listen to the noise this makes.
00:02:47	Can you imagine this noise, multiplied by 600? This object is heavy. It would have cut into skin. There'd be sites of sores around it. So this object represents the history in a powerful way. This is why we talk about the word gravitas in relation to this subject. It's a very serious subject. We need to think of that carefully, about the objects we use, and with whom, and how we use them.
00:03:16	That said, with older learners, it's absolutely hugely important, I think, that we do incorporate these objects into the learning. Because if we don't use objects like these, then the fact of enslaved people not going along quietly, we won't

	get that across. They had to be shackled, so this is a necessary part of the learning.
00:03:41	We also need to think very carefully about making sure students do not try these objects on, for the very reasons that I've explained. Some museums actually use the real objects. That's one of the reasons why they shouldn't be trying it on. In fact, I often would suggest that if a student really doesn't even want to handle some of these more contentious objects, that they shouldn't.
00:04:09	They shouldn't have to. They shouldn't have to. But we need to bring across the importance of these objects and how they're going to be handled in the session, right at the start. Not only just for the student learners, but also for the teachers who come with them. I've heard horrendous stories of teachers, an adult coming along with learning groups, who themselves are trying or getting students to try these on.
00:04:36	It really is very important that that doesn't happen. You might ask why students should not try these objects on, and I'm going to remind you again of what I said earlier, about these objects being carriers of the stories within this very distressing, in many ways, histories, and containers of that history.
00:05:00	And for us to be trying it on, it's not only hugely disrespectful, but it also... in itself, it's... I think it can be quite traumatising for some students to be in that position. So these are very important reasons why we shouldn't be trying these on. But there are other ways that you can work with these objects to be... to learn from them. I've already showed you ways that you can listen to the sound.
00:05:28	But it's also possible, for example, to put this down on a piece of paper, and draw around it. Yes? If they want to know about the... how deep it is inside, and about the length, and about whether something can fit inside, you can draw... you could take the measurement of it on a piece of paper and draw around it.
00:05:48	And another way to manage some of the emotive reactions to working with these objects is to provide as many opportunities as possible for students and learners to express their responses to the objects. Earlier I asked people, actually, here to write some words that came to them when they looked at these leg-irons.
00:06:15	And they've got constraint here. This one just says, horrible. Sore. Brutality. They may seem very simple words, but what it does, it offers an immediate response. And it's a way of managing some of the emotions that come up. I've even known students to actually spontaneously write a poem because they felt so full up of feelings.
00:06:44	And that should be allowed in the context of this work. It's inevitable that people will react strongly at times to this history, and because handling the objects deepens our responses to what we're learning, questions come up. Reactions happen that we have to engage with the students.
00:07:20	One of the first things for me, I think is really important, is that we normalise students' reaction. If somebody becomes upset in a session, I don't say it happens all the time, but it can happen... it's really important to acknowledge

	the fact that it's utterly understandable, given the context of this brutal history, that somebody may feel connected with something that's happened or something that's said.
00:07:45	Because remember these objects are deepened; because we're having a sensory experience related to these objects, we will react to them, or we can react to them. So to normalise the students' reaction. It's understandable you feel like that, because we are dealing with inhumanity. That's why it's caused you to feel like that.
00:08:08	But what's important as well is that we harness people's responses, students' responses, as part of the learning. This allows for empathic learning. Sense, sensual, sense-based learning allows us to use empathy. But it's not enough just to feel what we feel, it's to be able to understand it in relation to the themes and relation to the history.
00:08:36	Part of the way we do that, which is why it's important that we have responses that can be recorded, that we use discussion... if necessary you stop the session and talk about what has happened. Talk about difficult things that come up. Talk about when insensitive words are used and what it means. These discussions need to be had as part of working effectively with this history.