

triumphs Show

The power of two

how a drink in the bar at the SHP conference – and discovery of a shared interest in ICT – led to the campaign for a Blue Plaque for an eighteenth-century abolitionist

What do the 1970 Brazil World Cup-winning team, Charles Darwin and Vanilla Ice all have in common?¹ This was the question that Dan Lyndon and Donald Cumming posed to the delegates in a workshop at the 2012 SHP conference in Leeds. The answer provides a powerful tool for motivating students, engaging them in projects that take them outside the confines of the classroom, and challenging them to work like professional historians and campaign activists. Using the opportunities provided by Web 2.0 and combining them with more traditional collaborative methods (the post office!), students from Halifax and London were able to work together to campaign for an English Heritage Blue Plaque for Olaudah Equiano, the leading Black activist against the transatlantic slave trade.

These days, setting up a blog is as easy as writing an email. There are plenty of free blogging websites which you can use and they are a fantastic way for your students to learn from each other, reflect on their thoughts and respond.² This particular collaboration came about as a result of a shared interest in using ICT in the classroom to engage and enthuse our students. We were also keen to bring together students from very different backgrounds to collaborate on the same project. So a few years ago we set up the Equiano Blog to encourage Year 8 students from the Ridings School, Halifax and Henry Compton School, Fulham to extend their understanding of the contribution that Olaudah Equiano made to the abolition of slavery. Both classes spent a number of lessons learning about the historical context and being introduced to Equiano's writings before going on to the blog to answer the following questions: 'What was the most significant event in Equiano's life?' and 'Why should we study Equiano today?'³ The response was fantastic, with students eagerly responding to each other's posts on the blog, taking their ideas and developing them further:

I also agree with [a previous post] because I think that the best part of his life was when Equiano was free to sail the world and go anywhere as a free man. And also another best part of his life was when he married that woman he fell in love with and married and had children. This would of [sic] given him hope for a very good life for his children.

Another post demonstrated the level of engagement that was facilitated by the project, with the students independently researching the topic and putting forward their own opinions:

I've just found out that he has a green plaque but that's nothing compared to a blue plaque.⁴

The publication of the blog on the Internet provided a number of advantages: the students felt that this was an

exciting, 'real world' activity and as a consequence took extra care when presenting their ideas and responses; the activity extended far beyond the classroom, particularly when other contributions were posted up from online readers who had discovered the blog; and, finally, the interactivity of the blog laid an excellent foundation for further partnerships.

The follow-up activity returned to a more traditional form of collaboration: peer marking. Nevertheless, in keeping with the spirit of Equiano's campaign, we decided to follow his example of letter-writing as a campaign tool. Our students were asked to write a letter to English Heritage to explain why they felt that Equiano should be honoured with a blue plaque in his memory.⁵ Once the letters had been completed they were posted from Halifax to London and vice versa, and the students proof-read and corrected the work before posting them back to their original authors for final drafting. English Heritage then received two large packets of letters demanding a blue plaque for Olaudah Equiano. One response on the blog summed up the experience very poignantly:

To everyone at Henry Compton, we all enjoyed reading your letters, they were the same quality as ours. It seems really weird talking to people from another school but it's kind of fun.

Unfortunately English Heritage did not seem as enthusiastic as our students and responded that it had not been possible to find a building where a plaque could be placed. This inspired a further round of investigation by the students at Donald's new school in Huddersfield to find places where Equiano had stayed during his tours of the country campaigning against the slave trade. Their research uncovered evidence for a building which still stands in Covent Garden, London.

There were other spin-offs from the blog with a mini project to get our students to contribute to Wikipedia. Our collaboration also widened to draw in professional historians.

Figure 1: The Green Plaque erected by the City of Westminster in 2000 at 23 Riding House Street, Paddington



Figure 2: An image of Equiano first published in his autobiography in 1789



At the 2011 SHP Conference one of the plenary speakers was Hakim Adi, senior lecturer in Black British History and founder member of the Black and Asian Studies Association.⁶ We approached him to ask him whether he knew of the 'Sons of Africa', a campaigning group to which Equiano had belonged. This led to an email correspondence and another connection with Arthur Torrington, founder of the Equiano Project.⁷ Both were able to support the students in their research and the outcome was a posting on Wikipedia.⁸

The power of collaboration is certainly one worth exploring; you never know where it is going to take you!

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REFERENCES

- ¹ The answer is that they all believe in collaboration!
- ² There are a number of free blogging sites that can be used very easily. The two most popular ones used by teachers can be found at www.blogger.com and www.edublogs.org
- ³ Equiano's autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself* is a fantastic read and well worth buying. A version of *The Interesting Life* is published in the Penguin Classics series along with some of Equiano's other writings, and the whole text can also be found online at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/equiano1/menu.html> The Equiano blog written by the students can be found at <http://ridingspirates.edublogs.org/>
- ⁴ London's Blue Plaques scheme, founded in 1866, commemorates the link between notable figures of the past and the buildings in which they lived and worked. The scheme has been run successively by the (Royal) Society of Arts, the London County Council, the Greater London Council, and since 1986, English Heritage. Green Plaques were launched in 1991 by Westminster City Council to draw attention to particular buildings in Westminster associated with people of renown who have made lasting contributions to society. See www.westminster.gov.uk/services/leisureandculture/greenplaques/
- ⁵ Details of the work of English Heritage and guidance on how to campaign for a Blue Plaque can be found on their website at www.english-heritage.org.uk/discover/blue-plaques/
- ⁶ You can find out about the work of BASA at www.blackandasianstudies.org which includes published work by BASA members, details of conferences and useful web-links.
- ⁷ The Equiano Project was set up to support the touring exhibition that was created about Olaudah Equiano in 2008, www.equiano.org/
- ⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sons_of_Africa

Figure 3: An extract from the Equiano Blog

LC year 8 Says: #34
June 20th, 2008 at 3:14 am
Bw- i agree, because the best time of his life was when he got set free
It must have been like "flying" as you said.
He was a very very speical man because he bought his own freedom and became a free man.

I g Says: #35
June 20th, 2008 at 3:15 am
I think that olaudah equiano should get a plaque cos' he deseverd it thats why he should get a plaque.
Can you explain why he deserves recognition in a little more detail? 😊

N D Says: #36
June 20th, 2008 at 3:15 am
i think the most significant point in Olaudah Equiano was when he bought his own freedom because as he was a slave he was badly beaten. He should have his own plaque as of all the pain he went through. x

S W Says: #37
June 20th, 2008 at 3:16 am
I agree with most people that the most significant time in his life was when he bought his own freedom. He had most of his lifetime took over by being whipped and badly beaten. When he broke his freedom he was a free man. He had the rights that any other man in the world had! Being the good man that he was, he decided to help abolish slavery, knowing how horrific it was. He published his book, in Halifax, which helped many other people around the world.