

# Miriam's Vision and the London Bombings

In this article **Liam Taylor** examines the development and motivation of a new resource teaching about the 7/7 bombings. Miriam's Vision considers how society can be hopeful when surrounded by acts of terrorism. It works to empower young people to consider human rights, when dealing with controversial topics

'We can't control everything which life throws at us,' says Mavis Hyman, 'but we can control our responses.' It is a message she hopes to share with young people, in schools across the country. But it is also a principle that has been important in her own life, and in the lives of those close to her, over the last ten years.

On 7 July 2005 Mavis's daughter, Miriam, was one of 52 people killed in the London bombings. In the course of an hour, terrorists detonated four bombs on underground trains and a double-decker bus as the capital's commuters headed to work. Miriam, a 32-year-old picture researcher, was on her way to a meeting that morning. She was on board that bus.

There are many ways that people respond to grief: each complex, personal, and legitimate. Miriam's family and friends found their own way to remember her, in the spirit in which Miriam lived. Miriam had been outgoing, generous, creative, and eager to help others; her life had brought joy, just as her death had brought sorrow. And so Miriam's family and friends set up the Miriam Hyman Memorial Trust, to build something positive in her memory.

Their first project was to establish a children's eye care centre in India, a place that Miriam loved and where Mavis was born and brought up. But they also wanted to educate a new generation in this country, growing up in the shadow of terrorism, about values of tolerance, democracy, and human rights. They made contact with teachers and education researchers, in seven subject areas, to develop a free cross-curricular resource, 'Miriam's Vision' ([www.miriamsvision.org](http://www.miriamsvision.org)). It was launched last year on the tenth anniversary of the bombings.

'No one should have to suffer so deeply and needlessly,' says Mavis, explaining her motivation. 'Miriam's Vision is intended to enable learners of

today to aspire to a life tomorrow which embraces a more inclusive society, safer from extremism and violent terrorism'.

I am one of the educators involved in the project, and developed the citizenship lessons in the resource. This is the story of the thinking behind the lessons and how they are being used in schools.

## Responding to terrorism

Terrorism, sadly, is one of the defining issues of our times. It dominates news headlines and, more insidiously, grips our imagination. Young people are not shielded from horrific images or nightmarish stories. They come into our classrooms eager to talk: sometimes ignorant, sometimes prejudiced, often confused, but with an expectation and eagerness to learn.

Diana Hess, an American educationalist, identifies four approaches to teaching controversial issues: avoiding the issue, denying its controversial nature, teaching towards a particular position, and striving for balance (Hess, 2005). Clearly, the first two approaches cannot be adopted in this case. But the latter two, though appealing, are not without their own difficulties. It seems reasonable, for example, to teach that rights are important: but what are we to tell students about conflict between rights, as arises in discussions of state surveillance? Likewise, a balanced discussion in class may be appropriate for some topics, but does it even have meaning in relation to acts as appalling as those of 7/7?

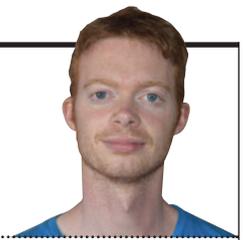
This made preparing the resource a daunting task but Miriam's family had a clear vision of what they wanted. They were keen that the lessons begin with Miriam's story, and the tensions and difficulties that it raises. But they did not want the resource to be confined by it. The essential message, in a phrase

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Miriam Hyman



starting point for discussing the values and issues that are invoked by the tragic events of 7/7, and our myriad responses to them.

### Planning the resource

In total there are 38 cross-curricular lessons in the 'Miriam's Vision' resource, aimed at Key Stage 3 students, and covering history, citizenship, PSHE, geography, dance, art and business and enterprise.

they repeated again and again, was about 'positive responses'. This was to be a resource guided by hope and optimism rather than despair. They wanted a resource that would recognise the compromises and conflicts within any democratic system, but with an understanding that these could be addressed with patience, fortitude and resilience, rather than by violence.

A good start, which sparked my own interest in the project, was a series of short films about Miriam's story. Focusing on Miriam's personal journey, and featuring interviews with her family and friends, they seemed a powerful route into a complex topic. The films were moving, of course, but they also presented Miriam as an ordinary human being, with an interest in drawing and travelling: somebody that many students could relate to, somebody who was very much like them. The intention is to show Miriam and the others who died not simply as victims of an atrocious attack, but how they lived: as rounded, interesting people.

The power of personal stories in citizenship education is well-known (Taylor and Palmer, 2006). Through the example of Miriam and her family, there seemed to be a way to engage students in the issues without resorting to shock tactics or mawkishness. At the same time, we were aware of the emotional force of the story, which could affect individual students in unpredictable ways. One danger was fruitlessly upsetting children; another was provoking the kind of angry response which fuels Islamophobia, exactly the opposite of what was intended.

The challenge, therefore, was to mobilise both the body and the brain: emotions, which give motivation to what you learn, and the intellect, which make sense of the world. These lessons are a

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# Theme

## Miriam's Vision and the London Bombings

Some of the lessons deal directly with the events of 7/7; others address democratic values or global citizenship (the dance module, for example, is based on traditional dances from Odisha, India, where Miriam's memorial, the Miriam Hyman Children's Eye Care Centre is based). Yet another strand concerns empathy and the value of making a difference in the lives of others.

The resource is designed so that schools can address one or all of the seven subject areas. However, a short, two-lesson PSHE module provides the context for other lessons. Rather than beginning with the shock of 7/7, the first lesson begins by introducing Miriam and her personality, and the atmosphere in London on the day before the attacks (when it was announced that the city would host the 2012 Olympic Games). From this beginning, citizenship teachers can move on to the six-lesson citizenship module. This takes students from the personal to the political, addressing issues of human rights and democratic change.

Most students will already have some familiarity with human rights. But, at least in my own experience, their understanding of the implications is often sketchy. Simply being able to list rights does not show a real grasp of the concept. The lessons on rights, therefore, focus on the tensions that can exist between human rights, especially, though not exclusively, those created by violent extremism.

So, for example, there is an activity that asks students to be human rights judges, required to give verdicts on seven difficult cases, from hate speech on Twitter to detention without trial. In the second lesson, students look specifically at the issue of state surveillance: they are put in the position of government ministers, who must decide whether to allow security services to monitor phone calls and internet activity. Both these lessons confront students with dilemmas directly, by putting them in the shoes of the people who wrestle with these problems in real life (teachers are encouraged to play up the role-play element using different seating arrangements or props).

The second part of the citizenship module tackles democracy, and ways in which students can make change through peaceful means. Students are given the 'tools of change' – images of several everyday objects – and asked to imagine how they could use them to take democratic action.

They then examine a case study: the campaign against a third runway at Heathrow Airport. We chose this example for two reasons. First, it gives an example of a wide range of democratic methods,

from electoral politics to non-violent direct action. Second, there is the opportunity for assessing the results of a campaign.

Finally, there are some resources which teachers can use to help students in their own active citizenship project, either in response to issues raised by 7/7 or to tackle a local issue of their choice. Teachers may or may not decide to take up this option, depending on the class time available.

### Student responses

The true test of a project lies in the responses of students in classrooms. The citizenship module was therefore trialled in Langdon Park School, a mixed comprehensive in east London. The year 8 students who took part are too young to remember 7/7, but the issues are very real to them. Aldgate tube station, near where the first bomb went off, lies in the same borough as their school. And most of the students are Muslim: issues of Islamophobia, which link in the public mind to terrorism, are a big concern in their lives.

'Our students enjoy tackling controversial issues,' says Kristen D'Intino, Head of Citizenship at Langdon Park. 'As Londoners, they could relate to the issue of the attacks and felt connected to Miriam as young people themselves.'

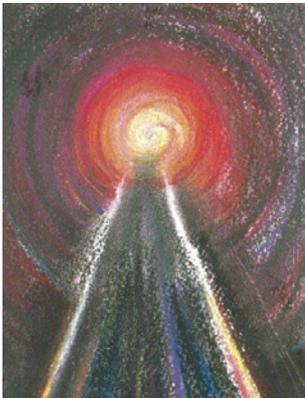
Naturally, given the students' backgrounds, the perceived relationship between terrorism and religion was a major topic of discussion. 'There was a lot of questioning about the attackers and the idea of the attacks being in the name of Islam,' says Kristen. 'Although this issue may be difficult to dissect, I believe being able to have open and honest discussions is important. Most young people are willing to question opinions and consider other views when given a forum.'

Some reactions were surprising. Teachers knew that students worried about terrorism, but were

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shocked at how many said they feared using public transport in London. 'I found this quite disheartening,' says Kristen. This highlights one risk of teaching about terrorism: that in talking about it, we heighten existing fears and lead students to overestimate the risks. Social psychologists have documented common cognitive biases, such as the 'availability heuristic' and 'probability neglect', which lead us to overestimate the likelihood of tragic events when images readily spring to mind or when intense emotions are involved (see Sunstein, 2003).



One of Miriam Hyman's artworks

Students' fears have to be recognised as understandable and to be expected in the context of 7/7. Open discussion in the classroom can at least help students to surface these fears and gain some perspective. There may be practical ways of alleviating some of those fears: for instance, the coroner's recommendations have been taken on board by Transport for London, and teachers can discuss this with students. They can be pointed towards the positive responses of some of the survivor stories of 7/7, and the response of the Hyman family.

A related question is to what extent the school can shape students values and beliefs. The lessons we developed for Miriam's Vision are apolitical, in the narrow sense, but they are not neutral when it comes to values of human rights and democracy. Could they make any difference to how students see the world?

'Students' values are established through home and community at a young age,' notes Kristen. But we should not assume, she adds, that all students have the opportunity to discuss these issues elsewhere. 'There is so much that many students discuss and contemplate at school that, for some, would never be open for debate at home.'

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### Miriam's legacy

As teachers and educators, we can assist students to be equipped for life skills. While students have a general awareness of terrorism, anecdotal evidence from teaching Miriam's Vision so far suggests that there is a remarkable lack of knowledge about the London bombings. This major event hardly appears to have any form of commemoration, let alone study and discussion in schools.

Many teachers want more guidance about how to teach these issues in class. Some resources already exist to address 9/11, but none focus on 7/7. Miriam's Vision offers teachers the opportunity to deliver a cross-curricular programme, while also providing material tailored to individual subject areas. Crucial issues consequent on the 7/7 London bombings, such as dealing with adversity and difficulties, diversity and empathy are all uniquely contextualised.

The study of the issues surrounding terrorism has a rightful place in the curriculum. Citizenship, and the arts and humanities more generally, have a vital role in promoting tolerance, respect, understanding, discriminate listening and independent thinking. Miriam's Vision makes a significant contribution to that effort.

All of the resources for 'Miriam's Vision' are available online, for free, at [www.miriamsvision.org](http://www.miriamsvision.org).

### References

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Thanks for the photo of students debating, courtesy of the Welsh Assembly, Launch of the Youth Engagement Charter, 16th July 2014.

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