History: Righting Historical Wrongs

What if history class taught that ‘saying sorry’ means ‘doing sorry’?

Valerie was aware that when she told children to say they were sorry, she often got reluctant compliance or a superficial acknowledgment of wrongdoing. What she wanted was a commitment to change. She saw this same pattern in history, a superficial “sorry”, or sympathy for historical injustice without seeing the need for peoples and nations to commit to deep changes to put right past wrongs that still impact today.

“First, we dramatically enacted a fictitious scenario of injustice that I created. Then I started our discussion with a set of questions that students use to critique the scenario:

1. What was unjust?
2. What caused the injustice?
3. What happened as a result?
4. Did the person involved do anything to put it right in words and actions?
5. What might be the lasting results from this situation?
6. What could be done about these long-term effects?
7. Can we learn anything from this situation?
8. Does this happen in other situations? What can we do?

“Then the class explored a historical situation of injustice (Valerie chose colonialism and aboriginal land rights) and used a parallel set of questions:

1. What do you consider to be wrong/unjust in this historical situation?
2. What contributed to this situation?

3. What were the results of this wrong?

4. What attempts were made to put right the situation: what was said and done?

5. It what ways might the results of that wrong be affecting us now?

6. What still needs to be done?

7. What can we learn from this for now and the future?

8. Does this still happen now? What can I do?

“Students chose either (1) to write the results of the inquiry on loops of paper that could be joined to make a chain, in order to show the connections between the various answers, or (2) to create a diagram that showed the connections. We discussed where saying sorry might fit within this connected chain, and whether saying sorry was enough without the actions on the links that followed it.”

What's going on here?

Valerie saw that history contains many examples of injustice that have lasting results. She linked this to civics so that students could see that what they learned in history and the big questions they were asking about justice could be connected to everyday life.

She engaged students in making personal connections with the subject matter, experiencing a dramatic enactment, and expressing a response (drama, linking the modern drama and history, and the chain links and diagram).

She reshaped her practice by changing her introduction, considering the story her lesson told about life (that justice is more than saying sorry), and using parallel lists of questions and paper-based activities to help make the connections she wanted to highlight.

What does this have to do with faith, hope, and love?

Sorry is never just words: the biblical concept of repentance is about commitment to change. Apologies for past misdeeds make little impact if there is no change in the behaviors and structures that caused the injustice. Superficial apology without a desire to change and put things right shows little love for those affected by past actions. Hope lies in the possibility of healing between people and between nations. But healing comes at a cost; deep change is never easy. The Christian model for this is God reconciling the world to himself, but he chose the costly route of the cross to achieve this. This costly model of reconciliation and restitution holds out hope that people and nations do not have to be trapped by their histories.

What difference does it make?

This activity makes teaching history personal and relevant, and it focuses students on moving from words to deeds and on the need for reconciliation when injustice has occurred. It helps students rethink how they understand sorry in their personal lives and in the wider world, and encourages them to see history as more than information.

Where could we go from here?

Some history units in schools present excellent opportunities for recognizing wrong and injustice, as well as looking at the relationship between saying sorry and making restitution (e.g., imperialism/colonization and the slave trade). The approach could be adapted for current affairs and local communities, as well as for study of some literary works.

Digging deeper

Throughout the Old Testament God intervenes on behalf of the powerless (Psalm 72, 7, 12) often represented as the orphan the widow and the stranger—those with no one to defend them. God expects his people to be just, making redressing injustice their aim. (Isaiah 1:13-17). God calls people to follow "justice and only justice" (Deuteronomy 16:20). In her song (Luke 1:51-52), Mary reflects on a God of justice who humbles the proud and

lifts the poor. Jesus welcomed the marginalized, mixing with the poor and the rejected and people whom others labeled sinners (Matthew 9:10-12)

Sometimes learning can feel impersonal and disconnected from life: handling data, manipulating figures, researching, and learning different skills can seem a world away from everyday life, where learning has more to do with people and communities. Ultimately, the Christian faith is about a relationship with God that makes a radical difference to how life is lived.

The incentive to peacemaking is love, but it degenerates into appeasement whenever justice is ignored. To forgive and to ask for forgiveness are both costly exercises. All authentic Christian peacemaking exhibits the love and justice—and so the pain—of the cross. *John Stott*

Previous: History and Wealth
What if history were about differen...

Next: The Meaning of Time
What if children were helped to thi...