

How to make good citizens of us all

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Studying conflict on the web, online debates with MPs, prison made real on CD-rom... Heather McLean sees how citizenship can be livened up in class:

Citizenship is possibly the vaguest subject to have hit the curriculum. To help teachers across the board embed this topic into the syllabus, the Department for Education and Skills recently hit Newcastle with one of its series of roadshow forums, drawing on the best practice ideas of a range of speakers promoting use of ICT in citizenship lessons.

"Citizenship hasn't yet got an identity for itself," says Daniell Phillips, one of the speakers and education project manager for the Their Past, Your Future programme at London's Imperial War Museum. "By grasping the ICT ball, teachers are able to help citizenship become a standalone subject that can cut across all subjects. If used properly, ICT can make these links for teachers and provide the process for teaching citizenship."

Their Past, Your Future is exploring citizenship through the study of conflict, focusing on the 60th anniversary of the second world war in 2005. There are many different strands to the overall programme, including a website - www.theirpast-yourfuture.org.uk - which carries ICT resources and guidance for teachers. It's a framework of information, outlining the different strands of the project and showcasing schoolwork. A second part to the site, due to go live next month, aims to increase the resources available and collect personal stories from those who lived and fought during the war.

"This will show good practice and will also facilitate the learning itself through downloadable resources and learning online," says Phillips. "It will teach events in the war, using ICT as the facilitator, rather than just leaving the site as a storage base for what's being taught."

Another organisation using the web world is the Hansard Society. Ross Ferguson is new media manager for its e-democracy and citizenship division. This 60-year-old organisation, which is affiliated with the London School of Economics, is a political education charity. Its e-democracy department focuses on what can be used to improve the democratic parliamentary process worldwide.

The society has various ICT initiatives that can be used by teachers for citizenship lessons. "This is about helping teachers to empower their students, and learning to treat their schools as microcosms of society," says Ferguson. The society is also involved in www.mockelections.co.uk, which helps engage students in the political world through yearly mock elections.

However, its main resource is a website called Headsup, at www.headsup.org.uk an online debating space for those under 18 to discuss

political topics in the news and policies under consultation. The subjects are proposed by pupils, and they are often joined in debate by parliamentarians, who take what they learn and use it to inform political decisions.

John Johnston, a prison officer at Frankland prison near Durham, is part of the No Way Trust, which uses ICT to teach pupils what life is really like in prison. An interactive CD-rom comes packed with resources that should steer students towards making the right choices in life. It carries an exercise called The Open Road that allows a young person to explore decisions about getting involved in crime. There are choices within choices, and each time a game is played the story unfolds into a different scenario. It includes film footage of real prisons. "It's not a positive experience in prison," says Johnston. "This footage shows what it's really like, with real information that isn't available anywhere else."

The CD contains a database of thousands of questions posed by students. The trust took the top 10 and got young people to read out their questions, which were digitally recorded and put on the disk. These were then put to families of victims and prisoners, who were filmed answering them. "These are real people, real crimes, real victims," says Johnston. "We have also included actual press coverage of incidents on the CD to provide a complete overview of the consequences of a person's actions."

As a teacher on the front line, Neil Pittaway from Mill Chase community school has designed his own ICT resources to teach citizenship, showing students the experience of those living under different circumstances in other cultures.

Students surf around the school intranet on downloaded web pages and use software and programs created by Pittaway to learn about what it's like to live on a minimum wage, why some multinational organisations insist on treating staff in the clothing industry like slave labour, and what they can do to combat this sort of treatment .

Pittaway has designed Power- Point presentations and includes various websites for students to look at. One of them is a site from the Department of Trade and Industry carrying information on the minimum wage, and www.labourbehindthelabel.org to draw attention to the plight of those who work under poor conditions in the clothing arena.

"Web pages make students feel they have a choice about what they look at, even though we are guiding them," says Pittaway. "With ICT, they can choose when and where to click. I'd advocate that any teacher teaching citizenship should use ICT, in any lesson.

"Kids are so heavily into ICT that it helps aid their learning when it's used. ICT draws their attention, which makes it possible to encourage students to think more on a national and international level, and think outside the local community. ICT enables me to try to get them to open their eyes a bit."

Their Past, Your Future: www.theirpast-yourfuture.org.uk org.uk

Labour Behind the Label: www.labourbehindthelabel.org

Hansard Society resources: www.headsup.org.uk www.mockelections.co.uk