

Developing materials from the Black and Ethnic Minority Experience (BE-ME) project for use in undergraduate teaching

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Background and rationale

The Black and Ethnic Minority Experience (BE-ME) [<http://www.be-me.org>] is a collaborative project involving a range of local community groups, the local council, colleges and the university. It was established to record and document the experiences of members of the black and ethnic minority communities in Wolverhampton in the post war period up to the 1960s. The purpose of the project was to create a community based oral history video archive and to promote the use of materials for education, by encouraging curriculum development and enhancing student learning.

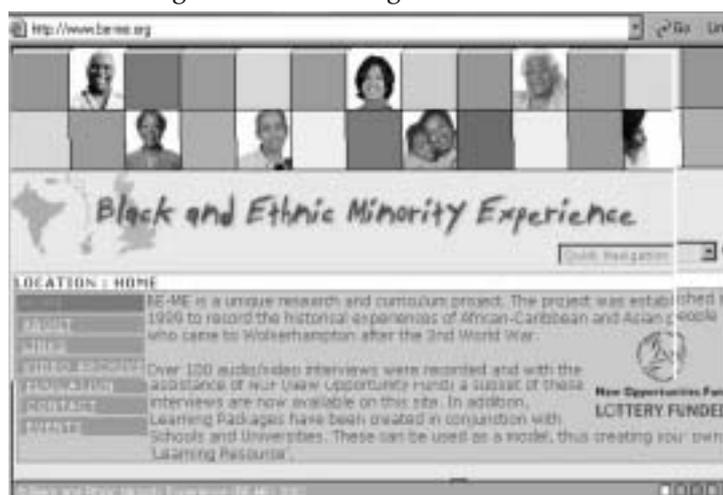


Figure 1. BE-ME home page

The first phase of the project involved interviews with 85 members of the Black and Asian communities in Wolverhampton. This was supported by a University Learning and Teaching Project within History (*Valuing Oral History in the Community*). Students had the opportunity to develop interviewing skills and to use BE-ME materials in undergraduate projects. The digitalising project (funded by the new Opportunities Fund), completed in September 2002, made it possible to access BE-ME materials via the web. The stage was necessary before the next aim of the BE-ME project, to develop learning packages, could be undertaken. This project sought to build on the initial project by integrating BE-ME materials within a taught Religious Studies module 'Religions in the West Midlands'.

The Humanities, Languages and Social Sciences (HLSS) BE-ME Curriculum Development paper from October 2001 identified ways in which the materials could be utilised within the undergraduate curriculum. The module RL1014 *Religions in the West Midlands* fits the specifications for curriculum development with its focus on the West Midlands. The use

of the BE-ME video archive in taught sessions and in student directed study aims to provide relevant local voices to supplement and illustrate issues relating to religions in the local area.

This innovation project provided an opportunity to integrate materials from BE-ME within an undergraduate module and to assess the potential of such contributions for the study of religion within a local context. Religious Studies has only recently moved to the city centre campus of the University of Wolverhampton and links have to be made with local religious communities. The archive provides a valuable insight into recent developments in the religious make-up of the city concerning minority ethnic groups and their religions.

The innovation

The aim of this project was to demonstrate the potential of the BE-ME archive for undergraduate teaching by developing a module learning package.

The first objective was to collaborate with the BE-ME team and technicians in order to develop an awareness of the content of the BE-ME archive and to develop the skills to access materials.

Access was available in two ways: firstly, through the BE-ME home page [<http://www.be-me.org>], using the index system to access short clips on set themes. This module currently has materials available on the university's virtual learning environment (WOLF). A hyperlink was created from this module screen to the BE-ME home page. A session was arranged with Swaranjit Kaur-Bentley, the BE-ME curriculum development officer, to introduce students to the project.

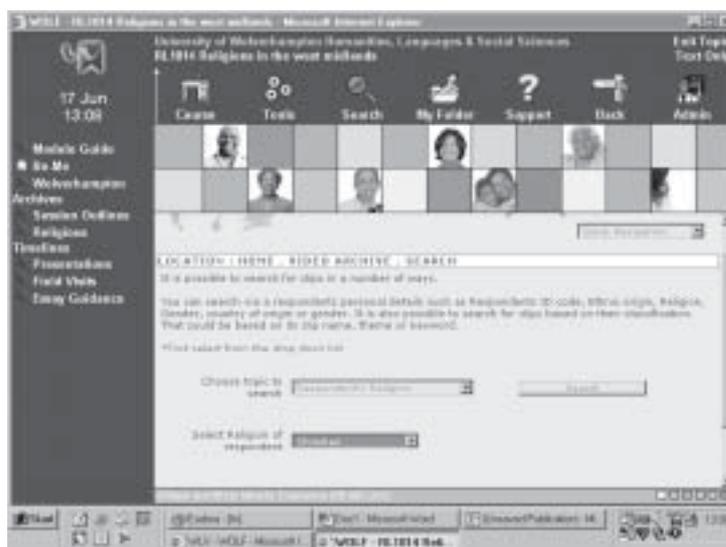


Figure 2. BE-ME video archive

Secondly, it was possible to get copies of clips for viewing in a lecture setting. This provided a better picture quality suitable for projection in lectures. These extracts have also been placed on WOLF for student access.

The second objective was to incorporate materials into the module RL1014 *Religions in the West Midlands*. The module aims to provide students with an understanding of the religious map of the West Midlands, its character and the main religious historical developments. This covers problems of adaptation and interfaith relationships. Field visits are an integral element of this module.

The publication of findings from the 2001 National Census (<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/census2001/>) included a breakdown of the religious profile of local areas. Figures for Wolverhampton reveal that 79% of the population stated they belonged to a religion, and that all the major faiths are represented in the city. The figures for Wolverhampton reveal a majority of 66.5% of the population identified themselves as Christian. Thus, the religious profile of the city has changed considerably since World War II, as all the major faiths are now represented, and the make-up of the Christian community has also changed. The *Directory of Places of Worship in the City of Wolverhampton* (2001) revealed that a third of the 120 places of Christian worship in the city are Black-led churches.

The academic study of religion requires access to suitable materials for students to gain knowledge and theoretical understanding. This has been a major challenge for this module and whilst the overall focus is on the West Midlands, there is still a dearth of published materials on the experiences of local religious communities. The BE-ME archive is a valuable resource in exploring the first-hand experiences of members of faith communities who moved to the area in the post-war period. They describe the reaction of the wider community to new faiths, and to people of colour who belonged to their own faith. Interview clips can be used to 'localise' issues raised by scholars about general experiences. Clips can also be used to help students consider the application of theory.

The outcomes

1. Students were introduced to the BE-ME project and visited the Wolverhampton archive which increased the range of materials that they could use to study local religious communities. Video clips from the archive were used in teaching sessions on Christians, Muslims and Sikhs in the West Midlands. Video clips from the archive were also uploaded into WOLF to provide better quality viewing.
2. The search facility on the BE-ME website enabled them to draw upon authentic local voices in considering issues about religion in the local area. They were able to hear the problems facing black and Asian Christians first-hand and gain an awareness of the impetus this reception had for the development of Black-led churches. Jacobs (2003) pointed out 'in order to really understand what religion is and what it means in individuals' lives we have to look at how it manifests at a local level.' (p.1)
3. Students were able to develop their own proficiency in using technology to support their learning. Each group visited a different gurdwara in the city and the electronic group folder facility in WOLF was used to share and store their own materials. A common questionnaire format was used for the visits and reporting on findings. Each group provided a draft report which was uploaded into WOLF. Final reports integrated tutor feedback together with an evaluation of the findings of other groups.

Benefits

The video clips and field visits to five places of worship in the city contributed to widening participation and developing links with the region and local communities. In addition it broadened the curriculum by developing an awareness of the significant contribution that African Caribbean and Asian people have made to the local area. The academic study of this historical period (and the present) was enhanced by the recognition of diversity, in hearing a range of voices from different communities. For example the generational thesis offered by Ballard (1994) was enhanced by the contribution from case studies. The extract 'Practicing Sikhism' provided students with an individual perspective which showed the need for a framework which went beyond Ballard's sojourner-settler paradigm. Students were able to consider an alternative hypothesis provided by Chryssides (1994) around the poles of apostasy, accommodation and renewed vigor.

By using technology, students were able to develop and demonstrate a range of appropriate skills, despite being in the first year of study. This worked best where students had to use

technology to complete assigned tasks, fulfilling the guidance offered by Grandgenett et al: "Perhaps the most important key to the successful integration of technology into the teaching and learning process...is to carefully modify the curriculum to include specific technology appropriate activities." (1997, 254)

Evaluation

Formal mid and end of module evaluation was provided by students, and the forum facility was used in WOLF to gain specific feedback on the use of BE-ME materials. BE-ME was regarded positively and students agreed that video clips enhanced sessions, particularly the session on Black-led churches.

Whilst the feedback was positive the question arose as to why students made so little use of the website and/or archive material in their own research? Students had a session with the BE-ME co-ordinator who introduced them to the wider project and showed them how to access materials either on-line or at Wolverhampton Archives. However, student use of materials was limited. Less than 10% of students used BE-ME materials on their assignment on the characteristics of religion in the West Midlands, despite the existence of relevant materials. The answer to this lies partly in a lack of confidence among students in using video material as an academic source and lack of confidence to visit the Wolverhampton archive to use materials. Whilst Mudge's guidance to "Provide the information in such a fashion that students feel they have some control over the way they learn." (1999,15) had been followed it was clear that more time needed to be spent on building up proficiency with technology. Working from Heppell's (1993) taxonomy of modes of interaction it appeared that students remained fairly passive at the 'narrative' stage. Thus, despite the specific aim to give students navigational control over materials they did not become fully interactive learners.

The quality of web clips was suitable only for individual small screen use. Selecting clips through the homepage and building hyperlinks to selections to use in lectures was not effective. Sound and picture quality was not suitable for projection onto a large screen. Some clips were edited and used on video during the session on Black-Led Churches. These were uploaded into WOLF for student use.

Future developments

The BE-ME archive is a valuable repository of local experiences. The broad interview format used means that a wide range of topics were covered in all interviews. These can be used to provide a holistic overview of individual experiences. Thus, rather than just focus on one strand of a person's experience the interview sets religion within the context of the individual's family, work and social life. This would enable students to move beyond their subject discipline and consider the way that an individual describes experiences to see if it is possible to identify individual priorities.

In the next iteration of this module one set task will be for students to view a whole interview to enable them to gain a better grasp of experiences by setting them within a wider social and historical context. In addition the focus on the experiences of the Black community will provide access to a greater range of interviews.

Discussions are also taking place with the BE-ME co-ordinator and members of local faith communities to fill gaps in the archive, particularly in relation to Sikh, Muslim and Hindu experiences.

The BE-ME website is a valuable resource for many areas of the higher education curriculum. Ranjit Khutan's project on *Health and Ethnicity* explores the potential of the archive for health-care professionals and other developments are taking place in local history and equal opportunities training.

Acknowledgements

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