

Bringing research to a wider audience, and having an impact on the young, is easier when there is a meeting of the minds

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Sparking the imagination of teenagers is never easy, so [Anne Haour](#) was initially stumped when she was faced with writing plans for 'youth impact' into her research bid. Here she writes how seemingly arcane research made an exciting impact on young people in the UK.



I have just concluded a [project](#) that specifically aimed to bring Higher Education research findings to a younger public. When approached concerning the possibility to bid for this 'Youth Impact' stream of funding, I was a little stymied at first. It is not easy to think about how my research into the historical development of a group of people in Niger and Nigeria – the Hausa – might 'impact on' young people in the UK. The fact I did not actually know any young people to target made this doubly challenging. I put my thinking cap on.

There is actually quite a lot about the history of the Hausa which might interest people outside academia. First of all, there was a time when they were hugely famous outside Africa. The Hausa cities – especially Kano – were the place all the European explorers wanted to get to: in terms of mythical appeal it ranked on a par with Timbuktu and the great River Niger. This appeal came from the fact that for some centuries the Europeans had heard about the massive city walls and the active manufacture and trade of these places. When the Scottish explorer Hugh Clapperton finally reached the city of Kano dressed in his finest, he was disappointed to find that he didn't attract notice as a foreigner and that items of European trade (such as a green umbrella) had preceded him to the marketplace. Thus the case of the Hausa reminds us that modern global politics and economics are just that, a product of the modern age. The key players have not always been the same.

Secondly, what constitutes Hausa identity has puzzled scholars for some time. Today the identity is often tied up with being Muslim, but historically there has been a great degree of syncretism. Hausa individuals often identify themselves by their city of origin rather than as 'Hausa', though they speak a common language which is immensely popular throughout West Africa as a second or third language (Hausa is today one of the three main languages of Africa). All of that would seem to offer some interesting parallels with the UK, which young people might find it interesting to discuss.

I thought we could bring this all together in a discussion of the negative stereotypes people hold about Africa. People often seem to assume 'Africa' (too often understood as a single place – even a country – when of course we all know it is a huge continent, hugely diverse at that) is dirty, poor, disaster-prone and dangerous.

So I had the potential topic but I still needed the youth. Here I was lucky to be able to draw on two excellent friends. One, Hannah, is a teacher at the secondary school in Norwich and her remit is precisely cross-curricular integration. The other, Faya, is a primary education inspector in Niger and a native of the predominantly Hausa town of Zinder. Hannah had a class of 26 eleven- and twelve- year olds and leeway from her school to develop original, cross-curricular initiatives. Faya put me in touch with the principal, IT technician and English teacher at a secondary school in Zinder. There, I had my group of young people.

I put together the bid to the AHRC/ESRC and got the funding. Now, we realised with a slight start, we actually had to do what we said on paper that we'd do.

Spring was a very busy time. Less supportive colleagues might have grumbled that I was spending the best part of a day a week engaging not with our own students but with pupils who were still a good few years from seriously

considering university. But our department is not like that. Before I knew it, the project had snowballed to include colleagues, postgraduate students and a partnership with the British Museum.

Within the existing timetable, classroom and museum-based activities at City Academy Norwich drew out aspects of religion and identity over time. Pupils took part in a series of exchanges with peers in the Lycée Ahmadu Kurandaga, in Zinder, Niger. They interacted via Skype, email, and postal letter. Together they created 'fact files' about one another, which they exchanged by email. Students in Norwich prepared and presented a news report from an African country, which was filmed.

The live exchanges through Skype were conceived of as a part of a gradually-developing research project led by the students, during which they acquired information about their peers at the partner school. At the same time more formal lessons – delivered through Powerpoint in Norwich but then shared with the school in Zinder – introduced new aspects and lines of thought, such as the definition of ethnicity in colonial Rwanda or the role of angels in Islam and Christianity. In the concluding part of the project the City Academy children visited the Sainsbury Centre at the University of East Anglia and designed a tour of its exhibits for their peers. The point here was to give them a sense of entitlement to the university experience – City Academy has historically extremely low Higher Education participation rates.

Through all of this, we encouraged pupils in Norwich and Zinder to reflect on two fronts: the way in which their identity is historically constructed, and how much their notions of the others' country might be shaped by stereotypes promoted by the media. The responses were very interesting. The British children, who had first had associated Africa as a whole with poverty and disease, came to the conclusion that 'they aren't so different from us after all'.

The teaching resource is currently in the final phase of development. Its aim is to bring to a wider audience the activities of our project and to support UK schools in implementing an integrated project which will enable students to make links between different subject areas. The site will go live in mid-November.

This project has graphically showed what results can be reached when there is a meeting of minds between two teachers whose students are some 15 years apart in age and experience. The project taught much to all who took part, and so showed that it is not only possible to bring the findings of Higher Education humanities research to broader audiences, but also to let those broader audiences – here, two sets of secondary school pupils separated by the Sahara – teach us, too.

Anne Haour has just completed a project entitled, 'Depicting identities in Africa and the UK: learning from the Hausa of West Africa' which was funded by an AHRC/ESRC scheme.

Note: This article gives the views of the author(s), and not the position of the Impact of Social Sciences blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

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Anne Haour is a Reader in the Arts & Archaeology of Africa at the University of East Anglia, where she teaches at Masters and PhD level and undertakes research. She is leading a five-year European Research Council-funded project in the north of the Republic of Bénin, West Africa, about which she edits a blog, crossroadsofempires.wordpress.com

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