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## Stories that Move

# Linking past and present in education against discrimination: key elements and challenges

### Abstract

*Stories that Move* is an online toolbox for learning about discrimination that aims to contribute to intercultural historical learning and to encourage young people to reflect on how discrimination affects people's lives. The toolbox includes materials for learners, which are available in seven European languages. One of the five modules, *Life Stories*, uses historical biographies. This article looks at how this module was received by educators across Europe.

### Keywords

Intercultural learning, Historical biographies, Anti-discrimination education, Active learning, Empowerment.

### Introduction

From its inception, *Stories that Move* has been a collaborative project, bringing together young people and experts to discuss both content and methodology. Throughout the development of the online toolbox and the first year of implementation, we have been collecting feedback. Further research based on quantitative and qualitative analysis of learner experiences can only be undertaken when more teachers have worked extensively with this tool. Impact assessment will then show what elements of the tool best support the goals of the project. Continual analysis of user experiences aims both to enable improvement of the online tools and to gain insight into how education can contribute to making young people aware of their responsibilities in responding to discrimination. *Stories that Move* was developed by the «Anne Frank House» in cooperation with educational organisations from seven European countries. It was designed specifically for secondary school students aged 14 to 17. However, we are getting feedback from a wide variety of educators in formal and non-formal education, ranging from universities and museums to youth camps and a Roma settlement. Within formal education the *Stories that Move* learning paths have been used for history lessons, civic education, religious and social studies, mentor classes and language lessons.

The aim of the toolbox is to provide educators with materials to stimulate young people to discuss diversity and discrimination, to reflect on their own choices by hearing the personal stories of their peers, and to become socially active. A key element in the tool is short film clips in which young people share their experiences of exclusion, discrimination, and hate crimes. Their voices are at

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the core of the modules<sup>1</sup>. *Stories that Move* focuses on five forms of discrimination: antigypsyism, antisemitism, discrimination against LGBT+, discrimination against Muslims, and racism.

Developing an educational tool with a team comprised of educators from seven countries with a variety of backgrounds (including historians, language teachers and human rights educators) helped the team look at each aspect of the learning process from many different points of view<sup>2</sup>. It has also made it possible to include a wide variety of stories, both contemporary and historical.

The structure and content of the tool are based on the insights of practitioners working in anti-discrimination educational programmes, human rights education and historical learning. Input from academic specialists led to discussions about what different forms of intolerance, hatred or discrimination have in common, what separates them and how they are articulated. Other topics, such as the role of the state, and concepts of social majorities and minorities, all fed into final decisions on how each module was formatted<sup>3</sup>. However, these debates were seen as secondary to actually listening to those who had experienced discrimination and intolerance. It was their voices, together with the practical realities in classrooms across Europe, that provided the framework for how the five modules were developed.

The *Life Stories* module is introduced with the question:

*« What do the personal stories of individuals tell us about history? Let's explore the history of discrimination by looking at different stories. Get to know the stories of ten people who have been affected by discrimination<sup>4</sup>. »*

<sup>1</sup> For an overview of the five learning paths: [www.storiesthatmove.org/en/for-educators/the-learning-paths/](http://www.storiesthatmove.org/en/for-educators/the-learning-paths/)

<sup>2</sup> The toolbox evolved from an international youth meeting in 2013. For information on the history of the project: [www.storiesthatmove.org/en/why-stm/how-it-all-started/](http://www.storiesthatmove.org/en/why-stm/how-it-all-started/).

<sup>3</sup> See the summary of the 2014 expert meeting by Monique Eckmann in the Conference Report: <https://www.storiesthatmove.org/en/history-of-the-project-2/>

<sup>4</sup> Offline work with historical biographies that formed the basis for this module is described in: NAHM Veronika, POLAK Karen, « Mit historischen Biografien Konflikte hervorrufen und im Dialog bearbeiten Überlegungen aus der Praxis zum interkulturellen historischen Lernen », *Psychosozial*, Nr. 136, 2014, Heft II. *Schwerpunktthema*:

The learners are asked to: « Write down three words about how discrimination affects people's lives ».

Feedback from educators who have worked with *Stories that Move* indicates that learners like key elements of the tool, such as active learning (by having choices), visible thinking routines and the diversity of the stories, from past and present<sup>5</sup>.

## Active learning

In *Life Stories*, learners are shown pictures of ten people and are asked to choose one, just on the basis of their face, name and a two-word tag line. Some pupils' choices are quite personal, others more instinctive: « *She looks nice* », « *That's my grandfather's name too* », etc. After learning a little about the chosen person, students discuss the stories in small groups. Each group then chooses one story to study in more detail, using the sources and a timeline provided in the tool. Finally, each group gives a presentation to the whole class and they discuss what they have learned.

An essential part of the toolbox is to give learners choices: who do they want to know more about? Which life story and topics are they most interested in? This helps to actively engage them and encourages the development of critical thinking skills.

*Stories that Move* uses visible thinking strategies to give students insight into their learning process; learning routines, such as a set of questions or a short sequence of steps, externalize their thought processes<sup>6</sup>. Importantly, in *Stories that Move* a lot of the learning takes place through talking, in pairs, small groups, and classroom discussions.

*Vielfalt, Identität, Erzählung. Geschichtsbewusstsein und Geschichtskultur in der Wandergesellschaft*, Nr. 136, 2014, Heft II, p. 51-63.

<sup>5</sup> User experiences with the tool were collected through questionnaires filled out during both the test phase of the tool (spring 2017) and by participants attending the international conference of educators in June 2018 who had worked with the final version. Several educators shared their personal experiences in interviews (summer 2018).

<sup>6</sup> The project team was inspired by RITCHART Ron, CHURCH Mark, MORRISON Karin, *Making thinking visible. How to promote engagement, understanding and independence for all learners*, Hoboken NJ: Jossey-Bass, 2011.

## The power of the voice

Reflecting on the work she did with the tool, Linda<sup>7</sup> (16 years old) in Austria said:

*« It is fascinating how the stories in the toolbox managed to move us each time. Even if the people and their backgrounds are very different, they all have something in common. On the one hand, they are shocking and show that homophobia, discrimination and racism are not something from the past. On the other hand, these stories give us hope. They show that there are people who speak out about what happened to them to give encouragement to others and to show us pupils that we can also help change things. »*

Linda's teacher added:

*« We worked with Life Stories as part of 'social competence training'. We had three hours of lessons and I was surprised at the students' concentration. The discussion on why all the stories are important was special and also how they explained their choices. The range of stories and the fact that they can choose which story to work with is a huge benefit. With the rich choice of sources and pictures they were able to prepare good presentations in a very short time. »*

## Little steps

Caroline is a teacher in a vocational school in Austria with sometimes poorly motivated learners aged 15 to 20.

*« As a teacher, I'm aware that I can't change 16 years of socialisation in my students. For example, they are sometimes quite homophobic. But I can focus on little changes. Stories that Move helped me think more about my teaching and focus on creating a good environment in class to enable discussions about sensitive topics. It also changed how I deal with my students' views and*

*prejudices. I don't judge them or put their opinions down. I want to know where the ideas come from and try to give them other perspectives. »*

Her students were asked to prepare a presentation and a poster, working in pairs.

*« I asked [each group] about the 'scope of action': who was involved and how they had reacted and what other possibilities they might have had. One student was working on Johann Trollmann, a Sinto boxer persecuted by the Nazis. In the text provided, he found references to SS officers and Kapos. We began talking about the SS officers and what they could have done differently, and about mass shootings and the soldiers who carried them out. The student felt the soldiers had no other option, and would have been killed for refusing, and I told him no, they were not killed for not participating in a mass shooting. And then he thought for a little while and said: But that means it was not only Hitler who was the bad guy; it means every person bears some responsibility. »*



Stolperstein Johann Trollmann  
There are two memorial cobbles, known as 'stumbling stones', dedicated to Johann, one in Berlin and one in Hamburg. © CC BY-SA 3.0, Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike, version 3.0 Unported: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>

<sup>7</sup> All the names used in this article have been changed for privacy reasons.

*«Another student presenting the story of Stefan Kosinski, who was imprisoned by the Nazis for being gay, said that homosexuals are now able to marry and the situation is totally different. I asked the class what they think about Schwuchtel [queen] still being a common term of abuse in our society, and how homosexuals feel about it. Nobody answered, but I felt they were thinking.»*

Daniel is a class tutor in a school in a small town in rural Poland. He began working with *Stories that Move* during the paper testing phase in 2016.

*«As a teacher, I was at a dead end. I was in good contact with my students, but something was wrong. After working with the paper version, we tested the demo online tool. They were completely different experiences, but both helped me rediscover my students and strengthen my skills as an educator.»*

*«Stories that Move is not about topics that are new for my students but it presents them in a way that was almost revolutionary for them. Firstly, it was an opportunity to ‘meet’ young people from other countries they would not otherwise encounter. Their voices and experiences are a completely different narrative to traditional classes. Working with their peers’ personal stories, my students were totally focused in a very new way. They remembered the names of the people in the tool and had long discussions about their statements.»*

*«A second surprise for me was that my students were also personally engaged with the characters from the past. Stefan Kosinski made the greatest impression on them - including the boys! They were so focused, choosing their words so carefully! At the end, many said they had changed their point of view about things that had seemed obvious and clear before, and they had learned something about themselves. Otherness, foreignness, being a stranger – these categories had been given faces and this allowed my students to understand something that would otherwise have been quite difficult.»*



Stefan Kosinski aged 23 in Poland, 1948  
A Polish youth who fell in love with an Austrian soldier during the German occupation of Poland. He was sent to a labour camp because homosexuality was illegal. © Lutz van Dijk, Netherlands/South Africa.

## The role of the educator

The first round of feedback from educators who have used the tool indicates that they feel encouraged to work on the topics addressed and are often learning alongside their students. The educators were asked: *«Is the content very different to what you otherwise teach?»* and *«Have you been inspired by doing the Stories that Move activities and, if so, how?»*

Their answers echo the Austrian and Polish teachers’ comments above.

*«I think the students knew a lot more than I did; as an adult, you may not have experienced some of these problems. I am part of the majority: white, educated. What I learned was that students are very open to discussion, which fills me with optimism.»*

*«I think it has broadened my vision about problems such as sexual orientation, other religions. I am aware of anti-Roma ideas, but I was not so familiar with the other problems.»*

*«I am hopefully more aware of problems my learners have to deal with.»*

## Challenges

Most educators' use of the tool and their experience of their students' learning process match the project team's aims. Similarly, the critical feedback often echoed issues raised during the development of the tool. Based on the feedback, several challenges and needs can be identified: how to link *Life Stories* to the existing curriculum; the need to contextualize the life stories; and the sensitivity of the choice of stories in different countries.

It is a recurring challenge to determine where in the curriculum the tool fits best. One Dutch teacher remarked that she had used it in religious studies, as it does not fit the history curriculum, whereas an Austrian teacher said it works well within that country's new civic education framework, in which «*basically everything is possible*».

The *Life Stories* guide for educators says:

*« The historical biographies were chosen to contribute to intercultural historical learning. The focus is not on a particular period, though the Nazi era plays an important role in many of the lives presented here. The contextual information given is limited. The aim is to reflect how personal lives are affected by discriminatory measures. »*

Students training to be history teachers in the Netherlands and Poland offered some interesting criticism. The Dutch students had been asked to analyse the module. One student wanted more information on the context of the life stories and felt that the learners had not been asked to consider continuity and change in relation to discrimination. «*No effort is made to create awareness of the difference in time.*»

Another student welcomed the skills called for on the learning path where the learners work with the sources, as well as the ethical dimension, but noted that critical reflection on the choice of sources is missing and that the learners are not asked to consider how the past is constructed.

Polish students criticised the inclusion of two of the stories, Simone Veil and Stefan Kosinski, which they felt supported undesirable ideological messages regarding abortion and homosexuality. Veil (1927-2017) was a Jewish lawyer and politician who survived Nazi persecution and became the first president of the European Parliament and

the first female cabinet minister in France. She also brought in a law legalising abortion. Her tag line was «*Determined pioneer*». Kosinski's story is introduced with the tag line «*Lost lover*», referring to the Austrian soldier he had a relationship with. Kosinski's timeline shows various steps in the decriminalisation of homosexuality, and ends with the decision taken by the German government in 2016 to annul the convictions of homosexual men made during and after the Second World War. One teacher said: «*The fact that the story does not stop in 1945 was new for my students and considered very interesting.*» The Polish students' comments reflect how sensitive the choice of stories can be. The inclusion of LGBT+ stories, for example, may stop some educators using the tool, either because of their own convictions or because of social pressure. However, the principle of giving a voice to and empowering those who suffer stigmatisation lies at the core of the tool.

## Tentative conclusions

Feedback from the educators who have used the tool indicates that they feel encouraged to work on the topics addressed and are often learning alongside their students. Two things stand out in the feedback from educators who have used the tool. They feel empowered to work on the topics it covers and experience a change in their own perspectives. These responses were not anticipated during the development of the tool.

The student teachers who expressed concern about the lack of context given to the stories may be underestimating the role the educator has in the learning process. However, their concern underlines the need for educators to have both a sensitive approach to the topics and sufficient background information to provide context. Whether this can be expected should be duly considered. How many educators can, for example, give background information on how LGBT+ human rights have developed over the decades?

Close monitoring of the project and intensive cooperation with educators and educational institutions will be the best way of finding the answers to these questions. Considering the position of minorities in Europe today, the importance and complexity of working with these stories is likely to become more evident.

## The author

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and other forms of discrimination with partners in seven European countries ([www.storiesthatmove.org](http://www.storiesthatmove.org)). She is a historian who has worked extensively in publishing and education.

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