

## ‘Bloody RE and Experiential Learning’ incorporating Art, some Drama and a little Science

### Frankley Community High School Case Study: Bethan Ruth

#### Purpose

- To illustrate how a single subject area can collaborate easily with several other subjects in order to design a compelling learning experience that fulfils RE learning objectives in a more experiential, creative and inter-disciplinary form, better suited for its learners.

#### Main emphasis

In year 7 students have previously followed two schemes of work – ‘Who am I?’ and ‘Looking at God’. Many of these lessons within these schemes have been teacher led and students have been taught sitting down behind their desks. Lots of written work has been produced but it is strongly felt that students need ‘another way into the concepts in RE’ in order to try to begin to appreciate their impact on believers’ lives and faith.

The department is very happy with the approach to RE in years 8 and 9 as it is much more engaging and experiential. It is with this in mind that the department wanted to make RE in year 7 more engaging and exciting as a learning experience.

Consequently the department wants to actively engage students more in their learning and allow them to take more of an active participatory role within it. If they are given the opportunity to ‘walk in the shoes of the believers’ then it is envisaged that they are much more likely to empathise and understand the believers’ perspective. Therefore, the way in which this scheme of work was designed has been to keep students focused on the following two of the six key concept areas that overlap:

Learning about Religion: <i>‘beliefs, teachings and sources’</i>	In the new scheme of work students will:
a. Interpreting teachings, sources, authorities and ways of life in order to understand religion and beliefs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Learn from and about the teachings for Khalsa Sikhs to wear the 5Ks.</li> <li>Learn from and about the story of the Jewish Passover.</li> </ul>
b. Understanding and responding critically to beliefs and attitudes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Comment on Sikh attitudes to martyrdom and the 5Ks.</li> <li>Respond to the meanings Christians may attach to the crucifixion of Jesus.</li> </ul>

Learning from Religion: - <i>‘identity, diversity and belonging’</i>	In the new scheme of work students will:
a. Understanding how individuals develop a sense of identity and belonging through faith and belief.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Learn from the Sikh establishment of the Khalsa and wearing the 5Ks.</li> <li>Learn from the way in which Jews celebrate the Pesach meal together.</li> <li>Learn from the Christian belief in Jesus’ resurrection.</li> </ul>

The overall aim is that RE moves towards a much more learner-centred and therefore experiential approach.

## School profile

Total number of learners	443
Age range	11-16
Specialist status	N/A
Level 5 and above in key stage 3 tests (2007)	Maths 46% English 43% Science 46%
Five A*-C at GCSE (2007)	52%
Special educational needs	205 (46%)

Frankley Community High School's intake is drawn largely from a deprived area of Birmingham and many students do not travel outside the local area or even into Birmingham city centre. Eight years ago the school was in 'special measures', but since then it progressed and moved to a 'notice to improve'. Following three very glowing Ofsted reports it has subsequently gone from strength to strength. In the last five years the school has attained over 50 percent A\* to C grades. In the last five years the school has ranked in the top five percent for contextual value added and last year every year 11 student left with a qualification, emphasising the school's stated goal of 'Achieving Success for All'.

Learners in key stage 3 at the school follow the newly launched Birmingham Agreed Syllabus for 2007. Entering into the spirit of the new secondary curriculum, the RE department has sought links with the art, science and drama departments.

The school wants to broaden the students' opportunities to be taught through a variety of learning strategies, including 'experiential learning'; that is, taking the learner to the centre of the hermeneutical cycle, and encouraging them to experience aspects of RE as a believer (from a particular religious community) might, and also by forging links with the other departments in the school.

For RE, most students are taught by a single, specialist teacher who is a qualified AST. RE lessons are challenging and thoughtfully planned, and tailored to learners' needs.

## Question 1: What were we trying to achieve?

### What were our learners like at the start?

Owing largely to a combination of weak literacy levels and some behavioural issues, nearly 50 percent of students are on the school's SEN register. They do, however, excel in practical subjects. This has been taken into consideration when planning a new experiential approach to RE as students will be given more opportunities to learn from and about religion without the confines of textbook or worksheet based lessons.

## **What differences did we want to see in our learners?**

We hoped to inspire students in their RE lessons by making them more active and by helping them to access the curriculum in the way best suited to their preferred learning style. Each lesson would include visual, audio and kinaesthetic elements and across the scheme of work each student would have an opportunity to access his or her preferred 'intelligence'.

The main difference we wanted to see in learners was for them to grasp the relevance of difficult religious concepts for their own lives; not merely on a superficial level but much more deeply so that they had a chance to try and 'walk in the shoes of a believer'. This would help them more fully to appreciate what Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac meant or the willingness of the first Panj Piare to allow themselves to die for their faith; or to understand on a deeper level what Passover means to Jews or the resurrection means to Christians. This would be done through experiential exercises that take the student to the heart of the religious traditions and teachings and help them know and understand the reasons given by believers for remembering these events.

We would also like to see students using what they are learning in art lessons in their RE lessons and vice-versa. Hopefully, students may also be able to use what they have learned in RE about blood in future biology lessons.

Also, we wanted to help students make the links between the origins of the Abrahamic faiths. It was hoped that if they studied the Passover meal through a re-enactment they would then have a much deeper and more accurate knowledge and understanding of the historical roots and meaning of the Last Supper for Christians. It is this progression in their knowledge and understanding that we wanted to develop most.

Finally we wanted to go some way to achieving a target set by a recent Ofsted inspection which was for students to broaden their cultural and religious awareness through trips out of school. As there are restrictions on too many school trips taking place, we endeavoured to broaden their awareness by encouraging learners to 'walk in the shoes of the believer'.

## **What attitudes and behaviour did we want them to develop?**

Birmingham's New Agreed Syllabus includes 'dispositions' that each student should have the chance to access when studying RE. We wanted students to be able to respond and evaluate their attitudes and behaviour in terms of the dispositions, so that they were really thinking about and taking on board what it means to act with and through: 'loyalty and steadfastness'; 'courageousness and confidence'; 'hopefulness and vision'; and 'remembering their roots'.

## **Question 2: How did we organise learning to achieve our aims?**

### **How did we set about making a change?**

The starting point for this new sequence of learning was to devise experiential activities that made use of help and expertise from the art, drama and science departments. In order to embed the religious believer's view of a concept being studied in the each student's mind, we needed a far more experiential and hermeneutical approach. Building on an original idea from Lat Blaylock looking at how blood features in many religious traditions,<sup>1</sup> two colleagues, Janet Hopton and Kathryn Kane, developed some ideas that provided a basis for this case study.

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<sup>1</sup> Blaylock, L., 2001, 'Bloody RE', in *RE Today*, Autumn 2001, Vol. 19.1, p.42.

We began by liaising with the drama department's AST and seeking her advice on how to incorporate a drama technique into RE. Beginning with concepts in the RE syllabus to be covered, we planned a role-play on Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac where students would use the techniques of Brecht's naturalism to present their dramas. Brecht's technique involves the characters talking directly to the audience in between re-telling the story through acting it out. When the actor speaks to the audience he or she relays the reasons for their action. The audience is not meant to react in an emotional manner but react to the moral question being posed. This helped us form our 'key question' for the new scheme of work, *'Is it ever right to sacrifice yourself or others for a great cause/good?'*

The AST, Sue Phillips, has produced several 'Theatre of Learning' folders detailing 'lesson recipes' to follow to bring the experiential into the classroom. These have been invaluable and have saved hours of new planning. There are written tasks at the end of each experiential exercise and although not all of these have been used here, they provided valuable starting points for the students' follow-up work.

Our second cross-curricular link was with the science department. With the help of one of the biology teachers, we designed a lesson on blood from a purely scientific basis, so that students would know and understand its factual importance.

We also introduced a cross-curricular link with art. It was a challenge to incorporate RE concepts into the art department's scheduled work on 3D sculpture, but this was made easier by the professional and cooperative approach of the teacher involved. Together, we planned a project with two of the four year seven classes on blood. Here, students would design their own blood platelets with facts about blood around the outside. At the centre would be the religion's link with blood and the appropriate concept of sacrifice or crucifixion (etc). At the core of the platelet would be the symbolic representation the students regard as ultimately important in their life. It was hoped that they would be able to show that they considered there to be more than just blood to a human being through this piece of artwork.

A further change made was the introduction of a 'homework challenge'. All year 7 students would be required to attempt the homework challenge in their preferred learning style. This would be given in addition to regular homework with the intention of challenging the most gifted students to learn more about religion.

There was also a change in teaching and learning from textbook and worksheet lessons to actively involved lessons for the students. It was pleasant to be able to see how easy it was to do this new approach within the confines of the classroom without the worry of having to move rooms or tell the students of changes.

The equipment and resources required in order to teach this approach to RE were easy enough to buy from a supermarket or bring in from home. No more planning or organisation went into these lessons that would have done to produce a worksheet or locate an appropriate textbook.

## **The RE Lessons**

The first lesson introduced the aims of the cross-curricular project to students, along with the key question, *'Is it ever right to sacrifice yourself or others for a great cause/good?'* and included an investigation of the factual importance of blood. Students followed this up by asking their science teacher more about blood and how it works in the human body.

The second and third lessons involved drama based on the story of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac; students had to devise a role-play using Brecht's technique.

Meanwhile, the Art department had been doing 3D sculpture with students. The art teacher took the concept of 'sacrifice' and encouraged students to make their own 3D blood platelets with images of what they would be willing to sacrifice drawn or collaged on to them.

Subsequent RE lessons have focused on developing students' knowledge, understanding and ability to evaluate the concepts of sacrifice, martyrdom, hopefulness, resurrection, Pesach and the idea of being a 'visionary'.

Follow-up written work is planned next, as we are interested to see if the quality of work produced, both in learning *about*, as well as *from* religion, improves as a result of the experiential exercises. It is hoped that students will be even more challenged in their thinking and spirituality during RE lessons and in a way that best suits their needs as learners.

### **Question 3: How well have we achieved our aims?**

#### **What differences are evident? What impact have we made on our learners?**

I am particularly pleased with the success of this new work. At the start I wanted to inspire the students with the RE lessons they were being taught. The art, drama and science departments' participation in this project was crucial to its success. Colleagues' positive and enthusiastic approach to inter-disciplinary teaching ensured that the students enjoyed the work on blood cells and sacrifice. Students made lots of positive comments when doing this work and said they were now more enthusiastic about RE as a result.

Students made lots of comments about wanting to know what we would be doing in our next RE lesson when speaking to me in the corridor or on break duty. They openly made comments after the experiential lessons such as 'can we do more of these types of lessons please?', 'I didn't know we did art in RE', 'I loved that lesson, it didn't feel like we were learning because we weren't writing, but we did!'

I believe that the impact that this work has had on the students that I teach is that it has 'brought RE alive' for the students. Instead of using worksheets and textbooks they have been engaged in something more tangible and comprehensible and relevant to their own lives.

Finally, I am now considering implementing this new approach to teaching and learning in RE across the whole of key stages 3 and 4. This is with the hope that it will enliven and inspire all the students I have the pleasure of teaching in this way.