

Memories Make a Difference – looking at others and ourselves through art and symbols

Holmfirth High School: Alastair Ross

Purpose

Our main aim was to encourage children to reflect creatively on their own beliefs and values and to see how their priorities can make a difference to the future – for themselves and others.

Main emphasis

To do this, we started by looking back to see how we remember people and events in the past and how these memories impact on individuals and communities today.

School profile

Total number of learners	1,250
Age range	11 - 16
Specialist status	Maths and Computing
Level 5 and above in key stage 3 tests (2007)	English 82%; Maths 84%; Science 83%
Five A*-C at GCSE (2007)	76%
Special educational needs	Just under 20%

Holmfirth High is an 11-16 comprehensive and coeducational school in Kirklees, West Yorkshire. It serves the Upper Holme valley in the Pennines, centred on the town of Holmfirth, five miles south of the centre of Huddersfield. Most of its students come from ten partner primaries in the local area, covering mainly suburban and semi-rural areas.

Question 1: What were we trying to achieve?

The starting point: Identifying the priorities for development What were our learners like at the start?

Most of our students want to be successful and happy learners. The busy curriculum does not always allow them sufficient space to develop their own personal thoughts and principles. Many of them enjoy and value the opportunity to do this when it is offered in a creative and challenging way.

We have always tried to encourage students to explore the links between global and local issues, religious beliefs and individual lives, rather than allowing RE to be just a dusty theoretical study. Students have responded positively to this approach.

In terms of attainment in RE, the majority of students are working at expected levels, though we judged that many could achieve much more if challenged to do so through a new project.

What differences did we want to see in our learners?

Main priorities for our curriculum development

In terms of *knowledge, understanding and skills*: we were keen for students to gain knowledge of how we remember the past today and to understand what beliefs and values underpin such commemorations.

We encouraged them to develop their thinking skills through reflection on their own values and the beliefs of others. We also wanted them to explore a range of ways of expressing their hopes, through art as well as language. We hoped that many would demonstrate the ability to work at level 6 in relation to the 'values and commitments' strand. This would involve them using reasoning and examples to express insights into the relationship between beliefs, teachings and world issues, focusing on things that are important to them.

In terms of *attitudes and behaviour*: through this process, we challenged students to develop their own beliefs and to develop an attitude of respect, understanding and tolerance towards others of different viewpoints and age groups. We wanted them to broaden their horizons as they looked at other people and their own potential.

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

How did we set about making a change?

The revised programmes of study encouraged the school to develop some new work. In RE, the key concept of 'values and commitments' stimulated thinking about how individual and corporate memories affect us today – for better or worse. In turn, we wanted to help students think about their own values and commitments and how to represent their aspirations.

As the RE team explored this theme, we realised that the new curriculum's encouragement of cross-curricular projects offered particular opportunities to RE. We prepared a pilot project jointly with the art team for Year 8, and also used the occasion to build further links with the local community. Initially, teachers from the art and RE departments discussed aims and possibilities. We also talked to a community artist with experience of working in schools and to a local project that tried to build bridges between older and younger members of our community. From these discussions, we planned a joint activity and piloted this with a year 8 class over a full day.

In order to engage and motivate learners, we developed a key question that would allow high quality RE and art to take place. The question we came up with was: *'What is worth remembering and how?'*

It was then important to develop activities focused around this key question and to encourage students to work in a variety of ways:

- talking about their own views but also listening to the experience and perspectives of others;
- expressing themselves through speaking and writing, but also through artwork and the use of symbols;
- exploring real life experiences of themselves and others.

We were determined the unit of work would provide them with a high quality learning and developmental experience through using the skills and expertise of different adults. In particular we wanted to link the concepts of values and commitments from RE with the skills of expression available through art.

What changes did we make?

Some key changes in approach included:

- building partnerships with people in the local and wider community through an artist with expertise in these areas and a local community group;
- finding time to discuss and plan jointly between subjects. We thought this might have been the most difficult thing to do in a busy school day, but found that a remarkable amount of ground can be covered in an hour. Altogether the project's basic planning took three of us about two hours;
- learning to interweave curriculum time so different specialists could teach aspects of the unit. Although the pilot involved taking a class off timetable for a day, we found the unit could be taught without serious dislocation to the existing timetable or new staffing demands;
- sharing of resources. We made better use of resources, including art equipment and electronic equipment. We were also able to play to the strengths and expertise of specialist staff.

The unit was taught jointly between art and RE. Specific aspects of the course were taught in scheduled lessons, so there was no requirement to change the timetable for these. Work with community partners did require some time where classes were combined.

The start of the unit focused on a visual stimulus, using pictures by Dali and Chagall, to see the symbolism of the last supper and crucifixion from Christian and Jewish perspectives. Students were asked to bring a symbol or picture that represented an important occasion for them. These symbols were then shared in friendship pairs or

small groups. This process enabled students to see how identity and values could be expressed through symbol and picture as well as words.

The next stage included a study of symbols that represent memories, such as the use of the poppy on Remembrance Day and the red ribbon on World AIDS day. An important part of this study is the investigation of the values behind these symbols and of the difference memories make today. Students are then asked to imagine they are leaving the country to emigrate elsewhere and to design a 'memories sheet' that shows how they want to be remembered. They can use pictures or words.

From these drafts, students then design a piece of art that reflects the key question: 'What is worth remembering and how?' This can be a collage of symbols of lessons from the past that they think will be important for future generations and of their own memories, values and beliefs. This links to art's key concept 'critical understanding'.

3: How well have we achieved our aims?

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

We asked students what they felt about the experience through discussion and a questionnaire. Teachers also considered their own feelings and evaluation of the pilot.

Students were keenly on task all day, and especially valued the variety and difference of the day. They appreciated having an extended period to explore and express the topic. Many found they were able to explore their own values in a new way and also to gain confidence in art. In this way, the experiment was symbiotic for both disciplines. Students have gained knowledge and understanding of how remembering the past informs values today. Many were struck by the memories of the older people who visited and demonstrated a sense of empathy. "The stories from the war made me think about what it must be like to live in terror and fear." "I have realised that although elderly people may look frail or incompetent they too have done great things."

Students also felt they could express their views and beliefs through artwork and not just words. This enabled them to express values and feelings more powerfully. "I learned that it was better drawing what you think about yourself instead of just using words." This helped those who were not natural art lovers. "I have learned that art does not have to be a drawing of a bowl of fruit but can be a statement and can say more than words ever could."

There was particular appreciation of being allowed freedom to express their feelings and beliefs freely, and in a variety of ways. Many raised their standard of work in both subjects. In RE, for example, more Year 8 students than before showed themselves capable of working at level 6, particularly in the way that they expressed in symbolic forms their own insights into the relationship between past events and the values needed to improve things in the future.

We feel that our work has had an impact on teachers as well as our students. In planning this activity we learnt that working and planning together was not as time consuming or difficult as we feared. In fact, we enjoyed the experience of ‘trespassing’ on each other’s discipline and seeing how different classroom protocols were managed. We are now looking at how we can link art and RE in a number of areas in different year groups. One student was intrigued that an RE teacher could learn an art technique from a colleague. She said (in a positive tone of voice), ‘it’s weird to see one teacher telling another what to do.’ We were shocked by the surprise but glad there was a message about lifelong learning.