

## Developing creativity, reflection and speaking and listening skills through Art, English and Religious Education

### The Highfield School: Kath Counce

#### Purpose

- To develop the learners' ability to use a range of forms of expression to communicate their ideas and responses across different curriculum areas.

#### Main emphasis

This case study focuses on expressing meaning through a cross-curricular approach to Lent by students talking, making and sharing.

Our key question, for all three subjects, was, 'What is the meaning of Lent for Christians and what can be learnt from practices shared by Christians?'

#### School profile

Total number of learners	1,033
Age range	11-18
Specialist status	Science
Level 5 and above in key stage 3 tests (2007)	En, 72%, Ma 84%, Sc 80%
Five A*-C at GCSE (2007)	59%
Special educational needs	19.8%

The school is an average sized fully comprehensive school with learners from a broad academic, social and economic background. The school is a Leading Edge Partnership School and the school received school Self Evaluation Accreditation in January 2006. The school is predominantly white British, with 84% of students in this category, however, 4.3% of students do not have English as their first language, which is higher than in most schools nationally. Provision for special needs is addressed through differentiation and intervention strategies.

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

#### Identifying the priorities for development

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

The RE Department wanted to develop further a year 8 Module on *The Meaning of Lent* acknowledging that the concepts involved in this module were particularly challenging and that some members of the cohort had difficulty in accessing their learning because of either literacy weaknesses or lack of engagement.

The key area for development was the skill of interpretation through different forms of expression as well as developing listening and speaking skills. As the subject leader for religious education my role was to develop cross-curricular links with the English and art departments to enable students' learning to be enriched and to become accessible to all.

### **What differences did you want to see in your learners?**

The main areas of development were to do with key processes and students' attitudes towards learning. We wanted students:

- to develop the skill of interpretation of a range of sources and forms of religious and spiritual expression from a variety of contexts;
- to be able to express their own ideas and beliefs using a variety of forms of expression, focusing on design and listening and speaking skills;
- to be able to reflect and evaluate their own and others' beliefs.

In relation to the Hertfordshire Agreed Syllabus, symbolic expression in a religious context is a key process identified within '*Ways of Expressing Meaning*'. In addition, this process is a common theme running through Art and English in the new curriculum. The development of this process is essential when enabling students to flourish as creative thinkers and reflective learners. One of the most important aspects to be considered was enabling students to have the opportunity to reflect on and express selected religious concepts in ways that would encourage them to be actively involved and responsible for their own learning as well as develop their listening and speaking skills.

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

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

One of our main aims was to develop a challenging module for year 8 students whilst ensuring accessibility for all ability and enrichment through different curriculum areas. We wanted to focus on students' creativity and offer them a different method of assessment. The module title was 'The meaning of Lent'. In the previous year they had produced a 'Hunger Cloth', that is, a large painting or wall-hanging featuring pictures and words that link biblical themes with modern issues identified by the students, who then add their own explanations of the scenes chosen.<sup>1</sup>

This year, the Heads of English and Art were happy to be involved in a joint project.

In Art, students would explore the skills of expressing meaning through the use of different materials, and in English speaking and listening skills would be developed; perceived to be a real weakness amongst our students. Through a range of material presented and reflected on we felt we could develop a compelling learning experience for students as well as opportunities to develop key skills in communication across three curriculum areas.

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<sup>1</sup> According to Adolf Adam in *The Liturgical Year*, in the 11th century a cloth, called the 'hunger cloth', was suspended in front of the altar beginning with the fifth Sunday of Lent. At the beginning of Lent public sinners were excluded from Church. The 'hunger cloth' may have been an acknowledgment that all were sinners and should partake in a 'fast of the eyes'. The custom of veiling crosses and images during the last part of Lent has changed over the centuries but you may see hunger cloths in churches today during Lent that have been designed by the church community or artists.

It was agreed that the focus would be *expressing meaning* through reflection, design and speaking and listening skills. There was discussion about how we would deploy strategies to develop each of these skills and agreed that the RE Department would lead on developing an understanding of the key concepts surrounding Lent such as temptation, repentance and forgiveness alongside the Christian belief in Jesus as the Son of God. Learning opportunities would also include how Christians celebrate Lent.

The Art Department planned three lessons in which students planned and designed their hunger cloths after working with an artist on how to create cut outs as templates for their designs in an RE lesson. The English Department's input was three planned lessons incorporating key words, language, structure and forms in the first followed by a session on creating their own poem along with preparation for their oral presentation in their final lesson. Assessment of this work was in the form of an oral presentation of the hunger cloth design and poem delivered in their RE Lesson.

The key concept for this case study was '*expressing meaning*' (C). In order for students to be able to create a hunger cloth to be used by Christians during Lent they needed to understand not only the themes of Lent but also the meaning of Jesus for Christians. Students therefore initially explored these key beliefs through comparing two artists' impressions of the Incarnation of Jesus; Francis Hoyland's work focuses on Jesus as the Son of Man whilst Botticelli's *Mystic Nativity* shows Jesus as the Son of God. Throughout this module was the use of a range of strategies to develop interpretation skills through a variety of stimuli including text, poetry and pieces of art.

By examining the characters of Jesus, Christians and themselves students were able to explore their own viewpoints on Lent ('*identity, diversity and belonging*' – D). Through Jesus they examined the themes of sacrifice and hope; through Christians' devotion and reflection during Lent they were able to examine the idea of self-discipline and some students considered the idea of temptation and forgiveness through their own experiences.

## **The RE Lessons**

The RE Department devised a series of seven lessons which focused on listening and speaking skills; through paired, group and class discussion students were able to begin to understand the key Christian concepts of the meaning of Jesus and Lent. Clearly structured activities through the use of images, card sorts and hands on tasks enabled students to develop their understanding. By answering set questions students would show their understanding of temptation, identify Jesus' temptations and begin to grasp the different ways in which Christians celebrate Lent.

One of the lessons would include a 'map from memory' exercise with the stimulus of the Crucifixion by Jacques Chery where students would build up the images as a group and then discuss their meaning.

We felt it would be a really compelling learning experience for all the students to see the work of a Christian Artist and to developing their understanding of the concepts of temptation, loss, sacrifice and hope as expressed through her work. Further examination of Jesus' sacrifice was to be offered through an empathy exercise when the clip of the crucifixion of Jesus from '*Jesus of Nazareth*' was shown; students were asked to put themselves 'in the shoes' of one of the characters and express their feelings as that character.

## **The Art Lessons**

The Art Department, through a series of three lessons, then focused on offering further visual stimuli and a range of material for students to design and create their Hunger Cloths or stained glass windows as an alternative; classes could choose to use acrylics or acetates. A student booklet was produced and issued to all students to draw the learning together; this included the assessment task, stimuli to remind them of their learning in RE and visual and textual stimuli in the form of paintings and poetry.

## **The English Lessons**

Three lessons in English focused on language and different forms of expression; the first lesson would develop students' understanding of different forms of writing through a haiku, a tanka and a sonnet. They would be given the choice of different forms of writing to reflect their work on the meaning of Lent. In their second lesson students would plan their poems for the presentations and through questions with their peers would redraft their work. The final lesson would provide students with an opportunity to prepare their two minute talks through open questions and answers in readiness for their assessment in their next RE Lesson.

## **Assessment**

The RE Department relies on the written word in all assessments, but the method of assessment developed in this module would enable students to be assessed through speaking and listening skills and expressing meaning. Level criteria for the assessment were agreed by all three departments making it clear to the students how they would be assessed in their work across all three subjects.

### **Level Criteria:**

- **Level 4**  
You have identified, written and spoken about some religious symbols through your Hunger Cloth design, Poem and Presentation.
- **Level 5**  
You have explained the meanings and use of symbols through your Hunger Cloth design on Lent, your poem and through your presentation.
- **Level 6**  
You have been able to make links between key terms and symbols about beliefs and ideas through your Hunger Cloth, poetry and presentation. These have been expressed deeply and thoroughly.

## **Making changes to approaches to teaching and learning**

The main difference to our approach to teaching and learning was to make cross-curricular links with art and English. We felt that this really enriched the learning. For the links with English, we emphasised strategies to develop speaking and listening, e.g., paired card sorts, class discussion of visual stimuli, question and answer. We also used haikus, tankas and sonnets to explore and compare different forms of expression.

A simple range of resources was needed: acetates and acrylics, plus poetry stimuli. We used three lessons in art and three in English to support seven lessons of RE. Students were provided with booklets to draw their learning together.

Planning time was crucial for success and regular reviewing, emailing and visiting lessons was essential to ensure the links for students were made.

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

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

The key area for development was the skill of interpretation through different forms of expression as well as developing listening and speaking skills. We are still in the process of evaluating this project as student presentations are about to commence. However, through teacher and student comments there is much evidence to suggest we have made the topic of Lent more meaningful and accessible to our students.

In the RE lessons with the Christian artist, students asked some thoughtful and profound questions as she described the ways in which her work expressed her faith journey. In response to her work students were then able to begin to explore how they could express the key concepts through shapes and silhouettes. Many students have commented on how this experience provided a secure starting point for them in creating their own designs. One student after the artist session said 'We're going to art now - are we carrying on with this now?' I had to respond 'No, next week.' Before the work began in art, students were asking art teachers about what they would be doing.

One boy, who was stimulated by the power points produced in the first two RE lessons, created an animated PowerPoint on temptation as a homework task; this was shared with the class as the starter to the next lesson and applause erupted spontaneously.

Disaffected boys and girls became more engaged in their learning through discussion. Students with writing weaknesses, in the main, enjoyed opportunities to talk and draw. Art teachers commented on how the students were very enthusiastic throughout their lessons and worked on developing very difficult skills; one student who has profound learning difficulties worked for a whole hour without moving from his place on his design; this had never been previously seen. He has subsequently become more willing and engaged in RE lessons.

What is clear is that the level of student reflection has been heightened as we can see from the student comments:

'I enjoyed making a stained plastic window because it made me think about religion.'

'I enjoyed using the gold, silver and black pens and painting it. It was also very fun to design them, the RE was fun and I learnt a lot about Lent. I can't wait to do the English part of the project.'

'I have enjoyed this project because it is really creative and fun.'

Many students have expressed the desire to do more cross-curricular work and how such an approach has impacted on their learning:

'Over this project I have learnt much about Lent, what it is and how it is done.'

'It was good to have more than one activity and more than one medium to work in.'

'We had three subjects to learn around and that gave us lots to think about in one lesson.'

Much can be learnt from such an approach: planning and good communication across the different departments is essential; regular meetings with the whole team of staff involved is something we plan to do more of in the future and timings of delivery needs to be tightened. However, as a pilot, we seem to have made clear inroads into meeting our aims, as seen in the words of one student:

‘In this project I have enjoyed watching video clips in RE; the different art-style pictures and thinking of different poem words to use in English.’