

Guided imagination as a basis for understanding the importance of special places

Parrs Wood High School, Manchester: James Holt

Purpose

- To develop students' understanding of the importance of places in a religion's and individual's world view.
- To harness students' imaginations to remember and visualise their place in the world and memories of their special places.

Main emphasis

This unit of work focused on Hindu celebrations. Students had already covered a lot of the major beliefs of Hinduism and celebration was to be the last part of their systematic study of the religion.

In order to make this unit a more compelling learning experience we made use of the key concepts in the locally agreed syllabus / non-statutory national framework for RE to design a learning experience that would grab their attention and engage their imagination. We used the concepts of '*meaning, purpose and truth*' (AT 2) alongside the work we had already planned on Hindu '*practices and ways of life*' (AT1) and decided to begin the sequence of learning with a guided imagination activity which we would build on in the subsequent lessons.

School profile

Total number of learners	2,000
Age range	11-18
Specialist status	Technology College and Arts College
Level 5 and above in key stage 3 tests (2007)	68.3%
Five A*-C at GCSE (2006)	67%
Special educational needs	9.1% (2.5% of students are SEN statemented and 6.6% of students are at school action or school action plus).

Parrs Wood High School is a much larger than average secondary school and has a large sixth form. The school serves a wide range of communities in South Manchester. It is a popular school and is oversubscribed each year. In Years 7 to 11 boys outnumber girls. The school has an above average percentage of students who are entitled to free school meals. Almost a quarter speak English as an additional language. Attendance is broadly in line with national averages. The percentage of students with learning difficulties or disabilities is under half the national average, although the percentage of those who have a statement of special educational need is broadly in line with the national average.

Parrs Wood High School is a specialist performing arts and technology college. It has gained many awards, including the international schools award and *Investors in People*. It holds the football charter award and is also a leading-edge school.

Question 1: What were you trying to achieve?

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

Students in Year 8 are generally well engaged with RE and are happy to build on their Year 7 experiences. They are working at between levels 3 and 7. As a school we are striving to help students understand the links between religious beliefs and their own lives. A significant number of our students have no specific religious identity and only see RE as a way of understanding the people around them rather than understanding themselves. As an RE department we seek to help the students have compelling learning experiences that help them reflect on their own experiences but then help them make links between these and other religions.

What differences did you want to see in your learners?

Main priorities for the curriculum development

In terms of *knowledge, understanding and skills*, we wanted students to develop an understanding of the importance of places and events in everybody's lives in order to have a basis on which to build a study of Hindu celebration.

In terms of *attitudes and behaviour*, we particularly wanted students to be aware of the links between every day life and religious practice; that even though people behave differently their underlying motives are often remarkably similar. In addition, using a 'guided imagination' exercise we wanted to take students outside of their usual thinking to realise that imagination is an important part of learning.

Question 2: How did you organise learning to achieve your aims?

How did you set about making a change?

We began by looking at the existing units of work and realised that there was a heavy reliance on understanding other people and other religions without relating it to the students' lives. We specifically noted, for example, that while students enjoyed looking at different Hindu celebrations and could understand some simple reasons for them, they didn't really understand the underlying reasons why all people celebrate special events or occasions. Students saw the importance of learning but no empathetic skills were developed and no application for their lives.

In order to help students deepen their understanding of the meaning of celebration, we decided to use a 'stilling' activity that would exercise their imagination and link the key concept of '*practices and ways of life*' (AT1) with questions of '*meaning, purpose and truth*' (AT2).

Although one member of the department had used 'guided imaginations' previously the majority of our teachers are enthusiastic non-specialists and had a few qualms about using this method. Our first step before engaging learners was to engage teachers. At the beginning of the year we held a guided imagination activity for the teachers to demonstrate the technique and how to manage student responses. All had a positive experience but there were still concerns about how Year 8 would

react. We developed a script and some appropriate background music and began by trialling it with a couple of the more confident teachers.

The length of the guided imagination was such that it could take place in one lesson. In future to develop the art work produced at the end of the journey we could combine with the art department.

We began by settling the students and getting them comfortable. Whilst the music was playing the teacher read the guided imagination piece which took the students into space and then back to earth to a special time and place in their life. Students then drew this place and displayed it in the classroom. A discussion ensued in which all students were free to participate or not. This was followed up with a plenary where the students led the discussion in what they had learnt and how this would affect future learning.

The next stage was to help students develop their written responses to questions about their designs, giving their views, for example, on why some events are worth commemorating in special ways. We then planned to encourage them to use the insights they gained from the guided imagination to inform their views on Hindu celebrations.

Question 3: How well have you achieved your aims?

What differences are evident? What impact have you made on your learners?

1. Motivation

The fact that all students could produce a piece of RE work about themselves irrespective of their religious perspective encouraged engagement. What was particularly pleasing was the lead which students took in explaining and exploring how this experience would benefit them in the study of RE and specifically Hindu celebration. Being able to reflect on their own experiences has helped the students make links and be more interested in their learning.

2. Knowledge and Understanding

Students gained an insight into different religious beliefs and perspectives in their class.

Young people were from different or no religious communities, so they were able to exchange views and experiences from their different perspectives. This gave them a better understanding of *identity, diversity and belonging* as well as *different lifestyles*. It also reinforced the idea that religious belief helps many people reach an understanding of the *meaning and purpose of life*.

3. Community Cohesion

Students made significance progress in developing attitudes of respect and empathy towards people and their special places.

4. Assessment Levels

Because of their increased motivation and engagement in this activity many of the students raised their levels in their subsequent work on Hindu celebration.