

## Learning Outside the Classroom

### Our Lady and St Bede RC School: Marianne Fleming

#### Purpose

To illustrate how two departments can collaborate to design coherent, compelling learning experiences that fulfil learning objectives in both subjects and enhance the quality of students' work.

#### Main emphasis

Students learned about the growth and development of the Christian church in the North-east of England through the life of St Bede, their school's patron, by visiting the monastery where he lived and by doing independent research using ICT. They reflected upon Bede's importance to the cultural heritage of the North-east, to themselves, and to Christians today. They used their ICT lessons to produce audio visual presentations on the results of their research.

The main conceptual focus for RE was 'Identity, diversity and belonging' (AT2); understanding how people develop a sense of identity and belonging through faith that has been handed down in a particular cultural context, but also related to 'Beliefs, teachings and sources' contained in Bede's writings and 'Practices and ways of life' in a consideration of the monastic life (AT1).

The primary focus for ICT was around finding and communicating information using a range of tools in a manner that was fit for purpose, met audience needs and suited the content.

#### School profile

Total number of learners	675
Age range	11-16
Specialist status	Currently applying for Arts College status
Level 5 and above in key stage 3 tests (2007)	English 81% Mathematics 82% Science 74%
Five A*-C at GCSE (2007)	58.9%
Special educational needs	15%

Our Lady and St Bede RC School is a fully comprehensive, Catholic Christian community. Seventy-five percent of students in our school come from the 25% most deprived wards in England. Many students never travel outside the local area. The school wants to broaden opportunities for students to experience learning outside the classroom, develop independent and collaborative research skills, create cross-curricular links that make learning meaningful and enjoyable, and deepen reflection on the religious heritage of the North-east.

The school follows a programme of study in RE devised by the Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle based on the Catholic Directory for England and Wales. Entering into the spirit

of the Non-Statutory National Framework, the RE department made links with the ICT department and incorporated an outside visit into the programme of study for Year 8. The concept 'Identity, diversity and belonging' in the new framework involves exploration of how people develop a sense of religious and cultural identity. Studying the Christian cultural heritage of the North-east helps students to understand the sources of Christian faith and enhances the students' own sense of identity and belonging to their school whose patron is St Bede.

The school is part of an Excellence in Cities Education Action Zone which has introduced creative uses of ICT. Although the RE department makes use of ICT in lessons, it had not made a formal curriculum link between the two departments before.

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

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

Our school has a wide spread of ability, with particular concentrations at the top and bottom of the ability range. Attainment on entry is below local and national averages, a reflection of our poorer socio-economic catchment area. However, attendance figures are higher than local and national figures and the students have positive attitudes to their school. Most go on to further education when they leave. They are in the main well-behaved, caring young people. The great majority come from four Catholic primary schools that follow the scheme 'Here I Am' and who have been working together with the secondary school through the Education Action Zone to develop common assessment methods in RE.

Many students lack independent learning skills, relying too heavily on the teacher. Reading comprehension is weak and although many can decode, they cannot explain what they have read. These elements are a particular focus for the school and influenced our curriculum development. Many students have not travelled outside a very limited local area, therefore they are unaware of the geography and cultural heritage of the North-east. We wanted to give opportunities for independent and collaborative research that engaged students, enriched them (through an outside visit), and helped them make creative use of new technologies as part of their learning, something we felt they would enjoy.

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

The school uses the Catholic text 'Icons'. The first unit examines the importance of a person's cultural, social and religious background. After placing Jesus in his historical and cultural context, the scheme looks at how key events and people in the history of the early and medieval church in England and Wales have shaped the Catholic faith. Although a broad sweep of history is covered, the school wanted to narrow the focus to their patron, St Bede.

In terms of *knowledge, understanding and skills*, we wanted our learners to understand their Christian cultural heritage, take pride in local history and culture, and develop a sense of belonging to a tradition through a study of the life of St Bede. We wanted them to know and understand the Christian beliefs that led Bede to live a monastic life, and to reflect on his importance to the development of English Christianity and to themselves, whose school is named after him. (These link with Catholic attainment targets AT1 (i) Knowledge

and Understanding of Beliefs, Teachings and Sources, AT2 (i) Reflection on Meaning: engagement with own and others' beliefs and values, and an opportunity for quiet reflection). We wanted students to develop the skills of independent and collaborative research, using ICT packages to research and present their findings in creative and original ways. We wanted them to improve reading comprehension by giving them opportunities to summarise research material rather than copy text from websites without acknowledging sources.

In terms of *attitudes and behaviour*, we wanted our learners to develop more independence in their learning, to find things out for themselves, to work with others in a team using their initiative and to express themselves in creative ways.

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

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

By introducing a visit to 'Bedeworld' we immediately engaged the interest of students, many of whom rarely go on trips and for whom the excursion would be a culturally significant highlight. The students were set a key question to consider, 'What can we learn from the life of St Bede that could inspire Christians today?' They were encouraged to find out all they could about his life, his work and his beliefs so that they would be able to appreciate his importance both for Christianity and for their own Catholic tradition. The 'hands on' approach at the museum (donning a monk's habit, processing in silence into the 1300 year old church, pausing to listen to Gregorian chant, writing with a quill pen, etc) motivated students to find out more and gave them reflective opportunities for engagement at a spiritual level. Some gifted and talented students borrowed a digital voice recorder and gave a commentary on the visit, explaining what they saw and learned.

Back at school the ICT department gave curriculum time to make PowerPoint presentations using photographs and voice recordings from the visit with hypertext links to audio files containing interviews and commentaries. Less able children were able to manipulate images and audio files successfully, employing different skills from those needed for a written assignment. They were able to make links between religious beliefs and sources by showing in simple terms how Bede's life was shaped by his faith and to say what inspired them about his life. The trip was followed up with homework and further research on the topic in RE.

Criteria were set across ICT and RE attainment targets. Broadly speaking in RE students were working across Levels 3 to Level 6. It was expected that most students would give their own and others' views on questions about Christian identity in relation to Bede's life and influence, and that they would give their own and others' views on the challenges of being a Christian while explaining what it was about Bede's life that was inspiring and influential (AT2, level 5).

In ICT they were working across Levels 3 to 6. Those who completed a flat, untimed presentation were working towards Level 4, but those who included hypertext links, sound and animation and showed a clear sense of audience and purpose were working towards Level 5. Level 6 would be reached if students had annotated their presentations fully to explain their choices. Students had opportunities for peer assessment, reflecting on which

presentations were most successful in conveying the life and importance of Bede. They were informed that the best presentations would be awarded prizes.

In order to take this more active approach to teaching and learning, agreement had to be sought with other staff to take half of Y8 off timetable for each of two full days. Support staff, learning mentors and form tutors were used to help with cover. The approach to teaching the topic changed from a teacher-led model to one where students were expected to find out information for themselves. Outside visits allow students to have a hands-on experience to draw upon when they return to the classroom. Changes were also made to the assessment which in the past had been a written piece that less able students found difficult to accomplish without a lot of help, and therefore which did not allow truly independent learning to take place. With a more creative style of assessment, students of varying abilities were able to present quality pieces of work. They were able, for example, to explain the importance of the monks in preserving the Bible for people today (AT1) and they were able to trace the connections between their own religious tradition and local culture (AT2). The new opportunities afforded by cross-curricular links meant that the time necessary to make audio visual presentations was shared between two departments.

### **3. How well have we achieved our aims?**

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

Students responded enthusiastically to the opportunity to show what they had learned through ICT. They were more willing to do independent research at home, using email to communicate their findings with their partners. They remembered key vocabulary more successfully because they had handled, seen or experienced the relevant elements. The opportunity to use ICT in presenting their findings created greater engagement with the topic and more teamwork. As one student commented, 'I really enjoyed working this way. I pretended to be St Bede when he was 7 years old and (my partner) interviewed me about what life was like for me at the monastery. It made me think about how I'd feel going there at such a young age and having such a lot of faith in God.'