

## Teaching Islam in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

### Holmes Chapel Comprehensive School, Cheshire: Sue Wilson

#### Purpose

The teaching of Islam has become more challenging in recent years. The main purpose of this sequence of learning is to help students to challenge prejudice and to encourage positively critical attitudes to different beliefs and points of view.

#### Main Emphasis

This unit focuses on issues related to social cohesion and uses Edward de Bono's *'Thinking Hats'* idea to help students develop a deeper and more well-rounded view of Islam and Muslims in Britain.

#### School Profile School profile

Total number of learners	1,132
Age range	11-18
Specialist status	a Specialist Science College
Level 5 and above in key stage 3 tests (2007)	Eng 90%, Maths 88%, Sc 90%
Five A*-C at GCSE (2007)	76.1%
A level results	98% pass rate
Special educational needs	19 students have statements; 55 are on "action +" register

Holmes Chapel is a popular school in a semi-rural location. It has recently received an 'outstanding' Ofsted report. The majority of students are bussed in from surrounding villages. There is very little cultural diversity. Visitors notice a calm, purposeful atmosphere in well-equipped buildings.

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

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

The vast majority of students are motivated to achieve their best. RE is a popular subject at GCSE and 'A' level. For this situation to be maintained, RE has to be perceived by students as relevant and challenging.

When the year 7 scheme of work was reviewed, it was felt by the department that it was important to address the students' changing attitudes to the study of Islam in the light of recent world events. The key concept of 'identity, diversity and belonging' was identified as a lead in to understanding and responding critically to beliefs and attitudes.

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

We wanted our students to:

- investigate and acquire knowledge and understanding of the main teachings of Islam;
- develop the skills to evaluate critically reports in the media which referred to extremist views within Islam;
- have a respectful attitude towards Islam.

This should then lead to them being able to form reasoned, informed and balanced opinions.

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

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

A six week unit of work was planned. The introduction especially, had to be a 'compelling learning experience' which excited youngsters about the lessons ahead. Six coloured hats were put at the front of the class and with a PowerPoint presentation, de Bono's parallel thinking approach was explained to students. We felt that this would grab their attention and involve them all in an exercise which would challenge some of their preconceived ideas. It would also extend their understanding of other people's beliefs and opinions. Focusing on the key concepts of '*identity, diversity and belonging*' (AT2) and '*practices and ways of life*' (AT1) we worked out a key question for students to address through the activities: '*Is Islam a force for good in the world?*'

Wearing the red hat students were asked for their *emotional* responses to the word *Islam*. This was done as a list of words from a group of students and individually in response to an image / photo, e.g. a woman in a burkah. A more challenging approach was also tried. Students were asked to form a 'conscience corridor' as a female teacher dressed in a burkah walked through and students gave their emotional responses to the teacher's appearance. Students began to keep a personal note book, adding ideas that might count as 'evidence' to use in answering the key question.

Two to three lessons were spent tackling white hat activities, i.e. *researching facts* about Islam. Students investigated the life and teachings of Muhammad and produced a 'living graph' in relation to those aspects of his character that Muslims admire (identity, diversity and belonging). They also investigated the 5 pillars of Islam and produced charts showing the possible impact of each pillar on individual believers and wider communities (practices and ways of life).

Wearing the Yellow / *positive hat* students explored the contribution of Muslim scholars to mathematics, medicine, architecture and garden design etc. and added their findings to their notes on aspects of Islam which may be a force for good in the world. (The work of the Red Crescent could also be included.)

The green hat encourages some *creative thinking*. Using a selection of newspaper articles, students consider how some Muslims perceive western values. They also worked out answers to such questions as, 'What new images of Islam do we have?', and 'Are there other ways for non Muslims to respond to items in the news?' Ideas were added to students' notes.

The black hat has some unfortunate connotations for youngsters and might be better as a grey hat (using their 'grey matter'). This is the stage of *critical analysis*. Students were asked

to reflect on whether their emotional responses had changed and to readdress the key question, 'Is Islam a force for good in the world?'

The blue hat is about the *big picture*. It can be used at the beginning as a lead in to such questions as, 'Where are we going?' and 'What are our goals?' as well as at the end, 'What conclusions have we reached?' Students wear the blue hat to answer the key question, giving reasons for their answer and showing that they have considered other points of view.

## **Changes**

**Time:** a unit of work was planned for 6 one hour lessons as part of a review of the schools' scheme of work for year 7. It was later felt that more time was needed and in fact an 18 lesson unit could be developed which included other aspects of Islam such as rites of passage, the mosque (practices and ways of life) and The Qur'an (beliefs, teachings and sources).

**Staff:** RE is taught by specialist and other humanities teachers. The humanities department plans to set aside meeting time for the approach to be disseminated.

**Approaches to teaching and learning:** the parallel thinking approach had been used with students attending a summer school.

**Assessment:** at the end of the sequence we hoped that many students would attain level 5, or be working towards level 6, in the key concept areas of 'identity, diversity and belonging' and 'practices and ways of life'.

**Facilities:** most classrooms have interactive whiteboards and projectors to allow power point presentations.

**Equipment:** 6 hats – or, students could wear bands of sugar paper in the required colours for each activity.

Cross curricular links – analysis of media; links to English & Citizenship.

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

Students learnt to reflect on their thinking and recognise that different thinking is required in different learning situations. Students were engaged and motivated by the lessons. Several commented that before this unit of work, they had been puzzled by styles and variety of Muslim dress, calls to prayer, which they had heard on holiday and had not questioned the fairness or accuracy of media reports. Most had been unaware of the contributions of Muslim scholars to so many areas of learning. Students used specialist terms with confidence and accuracy, demonstrating their increased knowledge and understanding of the main teachings of Islam. They showed a respectful attitude towards Islam and some began to critically evaluate reports in the media.