

Understanding the Numinous

The Hemel Hempstead School: Kevin Norwood

Purpose

- To help a Year 7 group understand what a numinous experience might be and how religious buildings can provide a context for such experiences;
- To engage students in a 'compelling learning experience' that would enable them to devise their own philosophical questions and produce their own artistic responses to the idea of the numinous.

Main emphasis

The aim of this sequence of lessons is to develop students' understanding of what might be meant by 'numinous' experience and the importance of such experiences for many religious and non-religious people. The central feature of the project is a visit to a spectacular place of worship; in this case, the Shri Swaminarayan Mandir in Neasden.

School profile

Total number of learners	1,250
Age range	11-18
Specialist status	Performing Arts
Level 5 and above in key stage 3 tests (2007)	English: 84.6% Maths: 84.6% Science: 89.6%
Five A*-C at GCSE (2007)	83.2%
Special educational needs	10%

The Hemel Hempstead School is a mixed secondary school which has received local and national commendations for the improvements in our GCSE and A-Level results over recent years. Only 2% of our students take free school meals and the vast majority of the learners attending the school come from supportive homes where learning is highly valued.

The RE department runs a condensed Key Stage 3 curriculum in Years 7 and 8 and commences a GCSE Short Course from Year 9 which is completed in Year 10. This year 71% of those entered for the Short Course in Religious Studies achieved A*-C grades.

Question 1: What were we trying to achieve?

What were our learners like at the start?

The pupils that attend our school are well behaved, keen to learn and revel in exercises that allow them to use thinking skills and work independently. The majority of the pupils are agnostic, as they have never really thought about religion or God, thus we wanted to do an

exercise that had the potential to evoke a religious/ spiritual experience. The Year 7 trip to the Shri Swaminarayan Mandir provided just such an opportunity.

We chose 15 students from three different form groups: two higher ability pupils, two middle ability and one lower ability. The assessment for this exercise covers many aspects of the Hertfordshire Agreed syllabus for RE: AT1 *expressing meaning* and AT2 levels 4 to 7 of the *meaning and purpose* area. This exercise also relates to *every child matters* as each learner can access the lessons and progress.

The students had already enjoyed taking part in Philosophy for Children (P4C) exercises, so were ready to do so again and make further progress in their RE learning.

What differences did we want to see in our learners?

In terms of *knowledge and understanding* we wanted our students to:

- understand the meaning of 'numinous experience' and why such experiences could be important to religious and non-religious people;
- develop their understanding and use of Thinking Skills through the use of a P4C exercise.

In terms of *attitudes*, we wanted students to:

- have an open mind in recognising that the atmosphere in the Mandir could evoke a numinous experience for some;
- to recognise that there was something different and special about this building.

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

How did you set about making a change?

The main idea was to incorporate thinking skills into Key Stage 3 lessons by devising a compelling learning experience around a composite key question: *'How and why are religious buildings special to religious communities and how might they evoke a numinous experience for some people?'*

The RE department already runs an annual two day trip to the Shri Swaminarayan Mandir in Neasden, London and we recognised that the visit to could be used to evoke a sense of a 'the numinous' and thus to highlight the importance of space and silence in religious buildings. Since we regularly use P4C and other thinking skills during lessons, I decided to develop this during our visit to the mandir to see how students would respond to the method outside of the normal classroom environment.

P4C is a simple process that involves: stimulus, private reflection, sharing and creation of philosophical questions (in the normal P4C scheme you would create a community and the group would discuss one or more of their questions, due to time and practicality I decided to only use the first 4 stages).

The stimulus in this case was the inside of the Temple. Students would be asked to concentrate on the decoration and what they were feeling. They would be encouraged to sit in silence engaging with the stimulus for three minutes and then write what they thought

about, again in silence. After this students would get into groups and discuss what they thought about – the sharing aspect. It would also be possible to make judgements about their speaking and listening skills at this point. Once they have shared their thoughts, students would be asked to create a philosophical question that summed up their group's thoughts. They were then to record their questions (ours are at the end of document).

We are in the process of consulting with the subject leader for art to see how we could use the visit to look at the use of art in religions and the art specifically in the Mandir. For example, learners might develop their understanding of the experience by trying to draw or paint their philosophical questions. So, if the question incorporates ideas on being calm, learners could draw/ paint 'calm' through abstract forms. As part of the consultation we are trying to find a suitable curriculum model to enable this kind of development to take place.

Our current timetable works on a two-week rotation with five periods in a day. It is prescriptive as each subject is given set and fixed periods to teach their subject matter. At present the school does not have curriculum weeks or faculty days, so in order for the visits to take place, we needed to gain permission from the Senior Leadership Team and from colleagues whose lessons would be missed by the students. Such visits are usually allowed on a fairly equitable basis, so that each department may take up as many opportunities as possible each year without disrupting the curriculum too much.

The visit

On the second day of our visit to the Shri Swaminarayan Mandir trip on 30th of January 2008, we took 15 year 7 students (five from each form that attended) and did a P4C exercise with them on numinous experiences. We chose two students from each form who are working at levels 7 and 8; two from the mid-range: levels 6 and 5, and one from the lower-range: level 4. (The pupils not engaged in this activity spent their time in the Mandir and at a talk about Hinduism and the Mandir.)

We explained the term 'numinous' to the learners before going on the trip and, with the SAL (Student Achievement Leader/ Head of Year), took the 15 pupils into the main part of the Mandir. They then followed the first four parts of the P4C scheme, including considering the nature of 'numinous experience' and how and why this place could evoke such a feeling. (If a P4C exercise is completed properly, even to only the 3rd stage, then it fulfils an AT2 Level 5 or 6 in the Herts Agreed syllabus.)

The Mandir's interior was the stimulus: the decoration and the atmosphere. The students were asked to think about what they saw and felt during three minutes of silent reflection. As planned, they wrote down what they thought about during the three minutes and then discussed their thoughts and feelings in groups of two or three.

We then encouraged the students to move about the main area of the mandir and look at the various features of the building's interior. The learners were supplied with a piece of paper and pen to record their thoughts and feelings and to write down some philosophical questions.

Follow-up

Back in the classroom, students will identify a single philosophical question for further thought and analysis. They will then be encouraged to write answers to their question from (a) a Hindu and (b) their own perspective. The activities that the learners will participate in

will allow them to reach the higher AT2 levels (5, 6, 7 and beyond) according to the Herts Agreed Syllabus.

Question 3: How well have we achieved our aims?

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

The impact of this exercise on the learners was for them to have first hand knowledge of this type of experience, the numinous, through being exposed to these particular environments. The exercise was a complete success for all the learners involved, and each with their own learning needs reported experiencing some form of a 'numinous experience'.

The learners grasped the idea of the numinous and something of what it entails for many people. This understanding was reflected in the philosophical questions they constructed¹:

- What make this experience so special?
- Why does the mandir feel so much more calmer than any other room?
- Why did the room feel so separate from everyday life and buildings?
- What makes you feel so calm and peaceful in there?
- How does white become so colourful?

Students could now both describe and express the meaning of the experience to themselves and to others. They could also say why it might be important to others to have this experience.

All of the learners who participated in this activity fulfilled the set criteria and reached AT2 level 6 (according to the Herts Agreed Syllabus) as they were able to '**analyse** the reasons why different people might believe different things about a range of ultimate questions and ethical issues, within religious and non-religious communities.' They achieved this through the processes of their question creation and the sharing element of the scheme.

We now want to follow this up further by using other religious and non-religious places and buildings to see if students have similar experiences. We plan, for example, to take the students to a local church, and / or a Buddhist stupa, so that they can develop their ideas on the important features of religious buildings that may help to evoke the 'numinous'.

¹ One group constructed questions that displayed elements of a numinous experience, but decided to put forward the question 'Why do the gods look so healthy?'