

Unique Creation

Bishopsgarth Maths & Computing School: Christine Paul

Purpose

- To introduce students to the study of 'ultimate questions';
- To provide students with opportunities to practise and improve their skills of interpretation and expression of abstract ideas;
- To develop a cross-curricular project with art and design and English departments that would broaden and deepen students' understanding of 'creation'.

Main emphasis

Students investigate feelings of awe and wonder by exploring an aspect of creation that is often overlooked. They consider questions of uniqueness, creation by design and creation through 'chance'. They interpret teachings and sources, and investigate questions of truth and meaning.

The conceptual focus for the sequence of learning was on '*expressing meaning*' and '*meaning, purpose and truth*' from the RE key concepts, and '*cultural understanding*' and '*critical understanding*' in the art and design key concepts.

School profile

Total number of learners	500
Age range	11-16
Specialist status	Maths and computing
Level 5 and above in key stage 3 tests 2007	40%
Five A*-C at GCSE 2007	54%
Special educational needs	36.6%

Our school is smaller than most secondary schools. The majority of students are of white British heritage. The percentage of students who are eligible for free school meals is well above average. The percentage of students identified with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is also well above average. The school has a 40-place base for students with physical and medical needs. The school serves a predominately white secular population with no religious commitments.

Question 1: What were we trying to achieve?

Identifying the priorities for development

What were our learners like at the start?

When students arrive at the school, their level of attainment in RE is below the expectations of the Stockton-on-Tees Agreed Syllabus. Although some students demonstrate ability at expected levels, the vast majority work below level 3, and so have not demonstrated the ability, for example, to reflect on spiritual ideas or skills. Many students find it difficult to deal with abstract concepts in RE.

What differences did we want to see in our learners?

The RE department felt that some compelling learning experiences could be designed that would give students an opportunity to reflect, express, and interpret aspects of the natural world.

In terms of *attitudes* we wanted students to develop a positive sense of their own ideas about the natural world. We wanted to increase their recognition of their own uniqueness as human beings and affirm their self worth. We wanted to develop their imagination and curiosity in recognising that the world is bounded by mystery and appreciate some of the wonders of the world around them.

In terms of *knowledge, understanding and skills*, we wanted students to become more confident at working at around level 4 in the two concepts areas selected for this learning sequence. We therefore wanted them to express religious beliefs about creation in a range of styles and words used by believers and suggest what they might mean (AT1). We also wanted them to ask questions about the meaning and purpose of life, and suggest a range of answers which might be given by themselves as well as others (AT2).

We wanted the gifted and talented students to exercise critical and appreciative judgement in order to distinguish between belief, prejudice, superstition, viewpoint, opinion and fact in connection with issues of conviction and faith.

In terms of *behaviour*, we wanted students to stop, sit still and think.

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

How did we set about making a change?

There are minimum changes to the timetable, the art, English and RE curricula were tweaked to provide opportunity for this project.

In terms of staff, cooperation between art and RE was needed and, as the project developed, English. All those teaching RE, including those with other specialisms, were involved in the planning process, ensuring aims were clear and all were able to provide the focus for the students' learning. Students told us that they most enjoyed using art and poetry as means for demonstrating their learning in RE, so we included these options in the lessons.

There was, from the beginning, a concept-based approach to the planning of the learning experience. We developed a planning tool to help us develop the unit, which began with the concepts and progressed. We used the secondary curriculum website to compare the key concepts of RE, English and art and were able to make links with 'creativity', 'critical understanding' and 'cultural understanding'. Using our locally agreed syllabus, we settled on

two concept areas for RE, one linked more to the processes promoted by Attainment Target 1 (learning from religions) and one linked more to Attainment Target 2 (learning from religion). These were '*expressing meaning*' (AT1) and '*meaning, purpose and truth*'. (AT2). We thought these areas matched best the area of the programmes of study we wanted to address.

We designed an activity to engage students in reflection, for example asking them to choose and reflect on a piece of bark. They would be asked to identify the colours, patterns and textures of their own unique piece. After gluing this to a piece of paper they would use their artistic skills and some specialist input from the art and design department to extend the bark, taking note of the detail. This was followed up by reading some of the Psalms that praise God for the creation of the universe. The poetic form of the Psalms was used to inspire some of their own reflective writing: the writing of a poem to express their 'surprise' at the beauty of their piece of bark. We asked students to reflect on the diverse and complicated make up of the bark and how this might or might not support the view that the world was too complex to have happened by chance. They were then asked to give personal views with reasons and examples as to what they now thought about the origins of the universe.

The Literacy co-ordinator joined the project late and using the project as a starting point went on to plan work on the use of metaphor in poetry. The poems used reflected on non-religious responses and students were able to produce their own expressive responses imitating the styles of poetry that they had encountered.

When it came to assessment in RE, we used peer assessment and the students decided how they would level the work, using the 'Can-do' level descriptors found on the *Better RE* website at: <http://betterre.reonline.org.uk/assessment/cando.php>. We also arranged for students to be assessed for art and design and English.

The project offered an opportunity for RE, art and design and English to work together.

Question 3: How well have you achieved your aims?

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

In terms of attitudes, we saw evidence in their writing and approach to the work that students had developed a more positive sense of their own spiritual ideas. The links made with the literacy co-ordinator improved the quality of the poetry significantly. The students had an opportunity to engage with text from a non-religious source and compare it with the Psalms. Some of the poetry showed an appreciation of the world around them. The activity of 'stilling' the students to begin the work proved useful as a starter for each lesson and provided the students with an extra skill for all three subject areas.

In terms of knowledge, understanding and skills, students with special educational needs began to ask questions about the complexity of nature and the origins of the universe and some began to share their own ideas and beliefs. Some were able to describe what had inspired them to produce the art work.

A number of the gifted and talented students were able to use their art work and reflective poetry to argue and justify their own views and ideas and could provide a detailed evaluation of how others might hold a different viewpoint.