

Creative Investigation into the Buddhist way of life

Ashton Community Science College: Claire Parkinson

Purpose

- To engage students' interest in RE through an encounter with a 'person of faith';
- To raise students' level of achievement to provide a base for further progress;
- To break down some of the subject boundaries through a cross-curricular, project linking RE with Art and English.

Main emphasis

The main focus of the case study is to provide the students with a stimulus, a meeting with a practising Buddhist, to motivate them into finding out how religious beliefs affect a person's way of life. Students then investigate the idea of a 'spiritually healthy lifestyle' and express what they discovered through an artistic medium.

School profile

Total number of learners	800
Age range	11-16
Specialist status	Science
Level 5 and above in Key Stage 3 tests 2007	English 64% Maths 69% Science 73%
Five A*-C at GCSE 2007	60%
Special educational needs	18.1%

Ashton Community Science College is a satisfactory and rapidly improving school. It has many good features; particularly in the way it is led and managed its curriculum. Ashton Community Science College is a smaller than average sized school which gained specialist status in 2004. It draws the majority of its students from the west of the city of Preston. The proportion of students who have learning difficulties and / or disabilities is average. The school has a 20-place Special Educational Resource Facility to support deaf students. A below average proportion of students are from minority ethnic groups and a smaller number have English as an additional language. The number of students eligible for free school meals is average. (15%) The school has Sportsmark and the Lancashire Healthy Schools awards" (Ofsted report November 2007).

The RE department follows the Lancashire Agreed Syllabus. The syllabus was reviewed in 2006 and will be reviewed again in 2011. The syllabus can be linked to the non-statutory framework providing the 'Field of Enquiry' and 'Faith Focus' lies at the heart of the planning (see the Lancashire Agreed Syllabus).

Question 1: What are we trying to achieve?

What were our learners like at the start?

When students arrive at Ashton Community Science College their level of attainment is below average across the curriculum and in RE the majority of students are working at level 3 or below. Many students are surprised by the range of topics being studied in RE at the school, particularly by the connections we make with what they think of as 'science' or 'English'. Some students were unfamiliar with the range of skills needed in order to be effective learners in RE.

What differences did we want to see in our learners?

Since some of our KS3 students lack the ambition and drive to achieve, we wanted to provide them with an opportunity to take more responsibility for their own learning.

In terms of *knowledge and understanding*, we wanted students to learn about a range of ways in which a Buddhist might put their religious beliefs into practice and why this might be important for them.

In terms of *skills*, we wanted students to develop their speaking, listening and questioning skills, so that they could effectively investigate how a Buddhist might live their life.

In terms of *attitudes and behaviour*, we wanted students to develop a desire or passion to investigate new things independently and to develop the confidence to transfer skills from one subject to another.

Overall, we hoped that students would raise their level of achievement to provide a base for further progress. In this case we wanted to see most students demonstrating the ability to use the right religious words to describe and compare what practices and experiences may be involved in belonging to different religious groups, for example, by using some Pali or Sanskrit terms in describing two different Buddhist types of meditation. We related this to level 4 in the key concept strand of '*practices and ways of life*' (AT1) in the Lancashire Agreed Syllabus.

To get a balance with attainment target 2, we wanted students to ask questions about Buddhist identity and suggest answers which refer to inspiring and influential individuals within Buddhism. We related this to level 4 in the key concept strand of '*identity, diversity and belonging*'.

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

How did we set about making a change?

I discussed the case study with an English teacher who had investigated the RSA's 'Opening Minds' curriculum and was keen to help produce a joint learning experience for students. I also discussed the case study with the Head of Art as we had already begun to explore links between our subjects.

The three of us then met to discuss what key concepts and skills we would like to address through a joint project. We decided to engage and motivate our learners by organising a special project day that would take 28 mixed ability students off their usual timetable and

would offer something different for all of them. To do this we secured the support of our curriculum manager.

The day would be based around a key question that would engage students' interest in all three subjects and this would be introduced to the students at the start of the project along with what the teachers would be looking for throughout the day (the learning outcomes). The key question we decided on was, *'What can we learn from Buddhism about a spiritually healthy way to live?'* This would also link in with the cross-curricular dimension of 'healthy lifestyles' in the new secondary curriculum.

Students would then be involved in a number of different activities using RE, Art and English skills and would be asked at the end of the day which way of teaching and learning they preferred and why.

We decided that the approach to assessing students' work would be verbal for English and RE. It was crucial, therefore, that teachers listened to the students' comments during the day and jotted down any evidence for the level they were working at.

Students would have a single base for the day and therefore time wouldn't be wasted moving around from one class to another. Our senior leadership team were fully supportive and very interested to see how the day worked with a view to giving other teachers the same opportunity.

Before the project day, the English and Art teachers and I delivered a preparatory lesson outlining the aims for the day in each subject. I provided some background information about Buddhism and the life of the Buddha and the story of Aung San Sui Kyi. The English teacher worked with the students on questioning and listening skills and on the meaning of words such as 'spiritual'. The Art teacher showed students examples of Buddhist mandalas and 'wheels of life' and worked with them on interpreting their symbolism and function for Buddhists and on different forms of artistic design.

Students were informed that the day would involve a new way of learning and teaching where they would become more responsible for their own learning and that teachers would be there to guide but would not be teaching from the front of the classroom.

On the day, in preparation for our Buddhist visitor, students were reminded of the key question, *'What can we learn from Buddhism about a spiritually healthy way to live?'* and then worked in groups of three to design some further questions they would like to ask. After the practising Buddhist spoke to the students a break for refreshments was taken and students discussed among themselves what they had discovered so far.

After the break, the English teacher and I helped the students evaluate whether their questions had helped them find the answers they needed. The Art teacher then asked students to design a mandala showing what they had found out about what a Buddhist might mean by a 'spiritually healthy' life and how they put their beliefs into practice.

Question 3: How well have we achieved our aims?

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

All students participated during the day; discussing in small groups, planning their questions and asking the Buddhist visitor a question. Students were very quiet when the Buddhist arrived but then the questions started to flow, with some occasional guidance from myself and the English teacher. As the session progressed students became more confident with their questions and began to ask for explanations of the Buddhist's religious practices and way of life. All students achieved their target level with 11 of the over achieving in RE.

In their evaluations of the day, nearly three quarters of the students thought that there had been hardly any English teaching and learning involved. We surmised that because the context of learning had focused around the interview with a Buddhist the students were unaware of how they had used a range of literacy skills and applied them in this different context. We plan to follow this up in English and RE lessons to reinforce the learning that took place.