

Ten ideas for better visual learning: images for better RE

Everyone signs up to the importance of visual learning these days, but there's a risk that it stops with adding a few illegal pictures from the web to your worksheets. After deciding that visual learning matters, then what? How can the strategies of visual learning enhance RE? Images may add zip, pzazz and vim to my tired lessons, but can they also deepen learning, broaden awareness and challenge attitudes? Try these ten ways forward, and send some more to the editor if you have some.


The PowerPoint Presentation called 'Spiritual Images' from the RE Today website runs for about 5 minutes, and sets pupils up to create a spiritual image of their own. It is designed for classroom reflection, rather than assembly, but teachers may like to think about the links between reflection and learning from religion that assembly can provide, and that should be provided as curricular entitlement in lessons.




These can be public or private, but if pupils are willing, the work done will make an excellent display. Try asking the pupils to select spiritual images from the media to accompany the ones they've created, or to choose three words that sum up their spirituality today (it's always changing). It is positively good RE to encourage spiritual expression, and reflection on the meaning of the word as well.




Some pupils may like to use images they select to create and present reflective PowerPoint presentations of their own. Themes like these might get them going:


- Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter
- The Secrets of the Heart
- We belong together
- The music of life.
- The mystery that matters

Adding music to the presentation (or choosing music to go with this presentation) is a creative way to engage pupils: music and spirituality often operate in the same human territory.

	What do you do?	And try this as well...	
<p>1. Select a picture pack for a religion: What 12 images sum up Islam? Christianity? Buddhism?</p>	<p>Use this as an assessment activity if you like. You'll need internet access, or a load of pictures connected to the religion you've been studying. A catalogue from the Artefacts companies such as 'Religion in Evidence' or 'Articles of Faith' is a good start! Pupils can cut, scan, select, copy etc. The energy of the activity is in justifying their choices – giving reasons.</p>	<p>www.strath.ac.uk/departments/soci alstudies/religion.database is an excellent online gallery of artefacts pictures from which this activity can be developed. Pupils need to write about their choices, justifying them carefully.</p>	
<p>2. Move the media: Create conceptual images from another source</p>	<p>Ask students to listen to a piece of music from a faith source, and as they listen to doodle their visual image of the music. Set this up with a short series of a few seconds each – heavy metal or chill out music are good alternatives. Then play a piece from a spiritual source for several minutes. What different images emerge?</p>	<p>The idea is that the image is a visual expression of the sound. Variations can include a visual representation of the words of sacred text. Try Psalm 23, I Corinthians 13 or the Mul Mantra. What music expresses the same emotions as this text, that poem or some other image?</p>	
<p>3. Design your own 'something' to express understanding of a religious practice.</p>	<p>Religions are full of meaningful symbolic objects. Rather than just getting pupils to write about them or to make one of their own, ask them to add some of their own meanings to the structures. So look at the Mezuzah, and ask pupils to say what words they would put on the scroll within, to remind them of the most important message they ever received?</p>	<p>Ask pupils to consider the significance of a prayer mat. It is about clean-ness, direction in life, stability, the presence of Allah. What objects can they devise and design that symbolise these kinds of aspects of their own lives? What makes them feel pure, or centred, or full of purpose? What helps if they feel alone?</p>	

<p>4. Use tableau drama with the digital camera to explore affective elements of key faith stories</p>	<p>Students enjoy this, and it can be good learning too. Get students to enact the story, and use 'freeze frame' and the digital camera to take a series of pictures that explore the emotions and feelings associated with, for example, the story of the Unforgiving Servant, the emotions of a Hindu funeral or a case study of capital punishment.</p>	<p>Take the pictures, then ask pupils to story-board and add speech and thought bubbles. There's a great example of this on the RE Today members website (see back page) from Anna Mantle who got her pupils to create 12 digital photos to tell the spiritual story of the life of the Buddha.</p>	
<p>5. Use a scaffolded visual learning structure to enable thoughtful observation of a visual stimulus from ethics or religion</p>	<p>Take a foetal picture of the child in the womb, and use it to introduce your study of sanctity of life issues in GCSE or Standard Grade. Ask pupils to use the writing frame from the RE Today members' website to record four observations and five reflections about the image.</p>	<p>This is such a flexible task that you can use it from under 11 year olds through to adult education settings, and on ethical, philosophical or religious issues across the board. Put an artefact, or a work of art, or a picture from the developing world, or an image of the divine in the frame, and watch the learning happen.</p>	
<p>6. Compare two works of art (or objects) from two different religions</p>	<p>Take two images of the Last Supper – classical and modern perhaps – and get pairs of pupils to list similarities and differences. Ask them what each artist got from the Bible and what each added themselves. 2 pictures of Buddha's enlightenment work well too.</p>	<p>Comparison is a very powerful learning tool – so why not compare the use of wine in Christian and Jewish ritual? The use of symbol in Buddhist and Islamic art? The meanings of Christmas to Christians and agnostics? The style of architecture for a mosque and a Mandir? Endless possibilities</p>	

<p>7. “Stupid producer” ~ help him out by creating a script to a film.</p>	<p>Show a silent video clip (3 or 4 minutes is enough), and ask pupils in pairs to construct a script: what do they think is going on? Studying sacraments? Use a clip of the Eucharist or a Baptism. Ask for commentaries from different perspectives – what would a radical priest say? And the baby’s mum?</p>	<p>BBC Curriculum Bites RE (series 1, 2003) has four ‘Short Religious Histories’, each about three minutes that are ideal for this activity, which prompts skills of interpretation. Or use a clip from a commercial movie that poses an issue about relationships, prayer, emotions, worship or... Another endless list!</p>	
<p>8. The Tree – roots, branches, leaves and fruits. A visual learners metaphor</p>	<p>Many of the key issues in GCSE and Standard Grade are about complexity – Euthanasia, wealth and poverty and crime and punishment are just tow examples. Get pupils to create or fill in a large diagram of a tree that shows roots, trunk, branches leaves and fruit. The metaphor helps them to see connexions and links.</p>	<p>Roots: the causes and underlying sources of the issue Trunk: the main issues, problems and questions. Branches: the ways in which the issue can be seen as a number of separate issues and questions Leaves: the case studies or individual examples of the issue. Fruits: the consequences of particular beliefs and values.</p>	
<p>9. The Iceberg – seen and unseen. A way of expressing knowledge and questions</p>	<p>Life after death is a good example of an issue in RE which deals in the uncertain. We cannot know for sure what happens when we. As Hamlet has it, death is ‘the undiscovered country, from whose bourn no traveller returns’ So use an iceberg, famously 90% below the waterline, to make a metaphor of the issues.</p>	<p>Give pupils an iceberg diagram, and ask them to fill in the top – visible – section with all that we know about life after death. Then ask them to put 90% of their effort into the ‘below the water’ section, asking questions and saying what we don’t know. This is adaptable for visual learners about any issue where what is hidden is more important than what is seen.</p>	

10. Collaging a concept: in this example, afterlife	Heaven, Hell, God, Trust, Prayer, Faith, Religion, Spirit, Humanity. Use a big concept as a guiding idea for a collage. This makes an excellent piece of homework, because it concentrates on imagery that depicts and alludes to aspects of any complex concept. Ask pupils to write 75 words to explain their collage. Pair and share at the start of the next lesson.	Where a concept has many meanings and lots of depths, then collage can enable pupils to select and organise their ideas visually. As many key RE concepts are like this, it's a good way to begin – or to finalise some concept work. The image on the right is evocative, but not specific to any one religion or viewpoint, so perfect for RE's image work.	
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