

Using personal photography in the classroom as a compelling conceptual enquiry stimulus

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Purpose

- To enable students to drive the learning process through astute questioning and critical thinking.
- To enable students to enquire into and evaluate the complexity of the concept of freedom and to apply their understanding to other scenarios.

Main emphasis

The main focus of the case study is to highlight the effectiveness of personal photography to stimulate enquiry based learning into the field of *Ethics* through *concept category F – Values and commitments*. The specific focus within the compound concept is the concept of *freedom*. The key questions driving the cycle of learning (not lesson) are: What is freedom? What is the cost of freedom? Can human beings ever be free?

School profile

Total number of learners	1,000
Age range	11-16
Specialist status	Technology College
Level 5 and above in key stage 3 tests (2007)	English 84.4% Maths 84.2% Science 80.2%
Five A*-C at GCSE (2007)	51%
Special educational needs	14%

Costello Technology College is a mixed comprehensive school situated on the outskirts of the town. It has a wide socio-economic mix of students. Students are predominately white with a range of ethnic and religious minorities. The largest minority group is Nepalese. Male and female attainment at key stage 3 is similar but at GCSE girls out perform boys in many subject areas.

Question 1: What were we trying to achieve?

Identifying the priorities for development

The priorities for the development of this particular cycle / compelling learning experience, was to offer students the opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of some of the fundamental concepts / ideas surrounding humanity and its basic values. We also wanted students to

evaluate some of the issues raised by the concepts through engaging with contemporary global events past and present.

Key individuals, that were to be studied as part of their GCSE in year 10, such as Martin Luther King could also be introduced at this stage. This unit on ethics was to provide a smooth transition between KS3 and KS4 and keep year 9 motivated and engaged in RE (especially boys).

There was a need to develop enquiry stimulus material (i.e. – resources that would by their very nature prompt students to ask questions and raise issues) that text books couldn't provide. Using photographic images that I had personally taken, instantly interested the students because they were not contrived or predictable.

Year 9 students needed to stay focused, particularly during a year that can so often see a drop in motivation in non SATS subjects. We have found that boys were more motivated when engaged in critical thinking and problem solving activities.

What were our learners like at the start?

The strengths of our learners lay in their ability to discuss and engage in local and global issues. The classes in RE are mixed ability and all enjoy plenty of opportunities to discuss major issues.

The weaknesses of our learners lay in their literacy skills and their need for highly structured tasks that provide frames for the outlet of their opinions and ideas and a need to encourage more independent learning yet within tight structure. Our students also had weaknesses in being able to evaluate an idea 'from within' not just simply evaluate their own outside opinion. Also, general critical thinking skills needed developing.

In a predominately white catchment area with high employment, it was important to investigate what Western societies see as their 'values' and 'rights' and how very differently these can be perceived (with sometimes quite devastating world-changing consequences).

What differences did we want to see in our learners?

Main priorities for our curriculum development

We wanted to see students begin to develop their own ability to independently drive the learning process through astute questioning and critical thinking of a CONCEPT – an important idea (placed within a definite context).

In terms of *knowledge and understanding*, we wanted them to really engage with and see the point of content / knowledge rather than just see it as 'stuff they had to know' but couldn't really see the point in. Knowledge for knowledge's sake was not a primary aim of this curriculum development. The knowledge used in the cycle of learning (2-3 lessons) on the concept of freedom, was to supplement a particular context.

The context in turn raised issues to be *evaluated and applied*. Knowledge about the Statue of Liberty and the significance that the statue represents to Americans and freedom was used specifically to *deepen the enquiry* into the concept of freedom. Knowledge on immigration to the USA was used in order to focus the students on reasons why the USA had been seen as

an icon of freedom and liberty from hunger and religious persecution in a way that Europe at the time was not.

Elements of Martin Luther King's speech were used specifically with the students to show how he felt about black people not having freedom from poverty and racism at a time when much of America was enjoying and developing great prosperity and seen as 'the land of the free'.

This curriculum development was far more focused on the students developing the key *skills* of good enquiry, communicating their own ideas about freedom, asking probing questions, raising important issues for themselves about constitutions based around freedom, evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the concept of freedom and applying their understanding of freedom to other scenarios, e.g. What should Britain have in its written Constitution? Should it? Could it?

The *attitudes and behaviour* that we wanted to develop in students was the ability to critically think for themselves, and be able to understand different perceptions of freedom and then to decide for themselves whether or not they think it is ever an achievable value/ideal?

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

How did we set about making a change?

We decided that involving students far more in their own learning would engage and motivate them. Setting up my own personal photography as stimulus material to which the students had to respond, through an enquiry based approach, was an instant motivator.

Firstly however, they were asked to respond to the concept of freedom personally, answering such questions as 'What does freedom mean to you?' on post-it notes which they then stuck to the white board, and then comparing their responses to others in the class. They then considered the similarities and differences and why there might be differences. The SMART board enables students to categorise the different definitions. They then considered where in the world or in their life one of these definitions of freedom might *not* be happening.

The process of enquiring into the concept of freedom, took them more and more into complex reasoning and analysis. Through developing a definite process of teaching (pedagogy) with the students and focussing on the concept at the heart of the learning process, I had started to make changes to how I approached teaching and learning. I had started with how the student responded to the concept then applied these opinions to other scenarios – hence testing their hypothesis.

The enquiry then opened up properly with the photographic stimulus. On seeing the Statue of Liberty students described what they saw and speculated on what she symbolises. Students then identified who had immigrated to the USA in history and why, and whether or not they could identify any potential problems with the wording in the 'American Declaration of Independence'. They moved their thinking into understanding and evaluating freedom within a particular problem-raising context – the events of 11 September 2001 (I used personal digital photos of skyscrapers and Ground Zero), the words of Martin Luther king and the lyrics in John Lennon's song '*Imagine*'. What were these people / events saying about freedom? In order that students appreciated and started to grapple with the complexity of the term 'freedom', we introduced questions such as, 'Is there a difference between "freedom *from* something"... and "freedom *to do*" something'...

Finally students were asked to make one statement about freedom that could go into the constitution for a new country. If they could not, they were asked to explain why not. All responses had to be based upon the learning done in the cycle so far. At no point was 9/11 justified; students simply explored the possible reasons, however 'un-Islamic', that were given by some groups or individuals.

Changes

The main change in the use of time was that topics or units were no longer divided up into one hour lessons. One concept took 2-3 lessons – a 'cycle of learning' rather than lessons. This enabled the concepts within the unit to be enquired into with far more rigour and thoroughness. There was no need to cover one concept each lesson.

Staff delivering this unit were specialists but there was a need for some individual staff training in teaching to a process / pedagogy of enquiry and in the use of concepts.

Assessment for learning opportunities have increased with students comparing and evaluating each other's responses to the concepts and far more assessment of individual skills such as evaluation and application of the concepts. These more frequent assessments of particular key skills have been much more effective in enabling students to understand the 'level' of skill they are working at, how they are learning and what they need to do next in order to make progress. Larger summative end of unit assessments that had previously been trying to assess too much content were far less effective in promoting students' understanding of their own progress.

Our classrooms are organized to be conducive to discussion and open enquiry. Seating is conference style. Students are able to move around to sit by different students with whom they share responses and come up to the front to present ideas and thoughts and use the interactive whiteboard. Images are most effective if delivered through a digital projector and interactive whiteboards enable students to move ideas around and categorize similarities and differences in each other's responses to a concept for example.

Concepts such as freedom (using contexts such as the USA declaration of independence, immigration, Martin Luther King) have excellent cross curricular links with history, geography and citizenship. The same concept of freedom can be delivered by teachers of those subject areas but approach it through each using a different context.

Question 3: How well did we achieve our aims?

In RE students understand how they learn. They can talk about it. They own their learning process. They drive the learning through their responses to the enquiry stimulus we set up for them – personal, photographic and real. They are aware of how a concept differs from content and how an idea (concept) always needs placing in a context if it is to raise issues and be evaluated and investigated properly.

Our learners no longer feel that they are learning about irrelevant content because it is a concept that they are making judgements about and within realistic issue-raising world and community contexts. RE has to relate to the students' concerns and interests and should not shy away from controversial issues. Ultimately, students can be positive about the concept being studied or negative, or both; they are never told *what* to think, only *how*.