

Good Learning in RE

Films for teachers from NATRE:
sponsored by Culham St Gabriel's Trust
and the Diocese of Saint Albans

Film 2: The Soldier's Dilemma / 9-11 year olds learning about Christian Holy Week and Easter, linked to moral thinking.

This lesson aims to help pupils understand the idea of a moral dilemma, using an example from a key story in the Christian tradition: the crucifixion. Helen Mellidoro, the teacher, uses the learning strategy called 'Reflection Alley' which enables a dynamic and dramatic encounter with the story for pupils, some active in a simple drama, others interested observers. Unseen on the film, but following up in the classroom, a persuasive writing task, with a literacy link, enables these year 5 pupils to think about difficult decisions and consider how to react to a moral dilemma about suffering and responsibility.

Key RE Concepts:

- Religious beliefs, teachings and sources (examples from Christianity) are explored in this work.
- Questions of value and commitment are posed and explored thoughtfully.

Key vocabulary and ideas:

- Vocabulary and concepts which are built up in this learning include: Dilemma / Choice / Morality / Crucifixion / Sacrifice / Right & Wrong / Commitment / Responsibility
- The main ideas of the story are made vibrant and interesting by the teacher through the skilful use of the dramatic idea. Pupils are provoked to ask 'what would I have done?' This question is the basis for moral and spiritual reflection and development.

Pedagogy and Learning Method:

This film shows a teacher using a drama strategy to explore Christian story with her pupils. Her learning methods include discussion, storytelling, paired conversation and personal reflective thinking. The dramatic scenario she generates by good storytelling becomes the basis for simple experiential learning, and the exploration of the dilemma of whether it is always right to follow orders uses a range of voices for learning. This is a pupil-centred lesson: their imagination and empathic engagement is linked to their reasoning skills and drama skills, with the storytelling as a stimulus.

Links to key RE strands:

This work is a part of a unit on key stories from Christian and Buddhist traditions. It links up work on sources of beliefs and teachings with work on questions of value and commitment, making it simple for pupils to explore and begin to interpret the story of the death of Christ from a fresh and varied range of perspectives.



Lesson outline:

In this activity pupils use an excellent classroom speaking and listening strategy to explore questions about what is right and wrong, selfishness and responsibility. The drama strategy called 'Reflection Alley' helps learners to recognise that there are complex ideas and many perspectives on these questions, and is fun. The learning approach stresses balance in understanding a moral dilemma. After the film is finished, the pupils go on to use the drama work as a basis for their persuasive writing: What should the soldier do, and why? What arguments do those on the other side use? Why do you disagree? They use the text of the New Testament to deepen their learning.

Learning intentions:

In this lesson, we wanted pupils across a range of abilities to learn:

- To describe the story of the centurion who was ordered to crucify Jesus (L3)
- To make links between the story and their own ideas of right and wrong (L3)
- To understand the difficulty of a dilemma where following orders and conscience pull in different directions (L4)
- To apply the idea of responsibility for themselves (L4)
- To explain some varied meanings which Christians give for the crucifixion of Jesus (L5)
- To explain their own views of how the moral dilemmas facing the Centurion could be handled, using ideas about commitment and responsibility (L5)

What makes for good learning in this example?

There are many features of good RE learning in this short film. The teacher's carefully prepared story telling makes the events of Jesus' last days come alive for the children. This version of story has been constructed to include a miracle story from the gospel, and pupils learn about the social and political context of the gospel narrative in some depth.

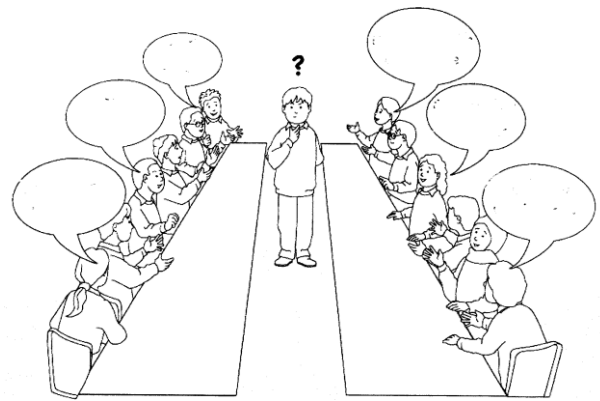
The pupils enjoy their learning. 13 of the class, eager and able speakers, are actively involved in improvised drama work, and the others find the drama their classmates are involved with is interesting. They all show that they are thinking about the issues. Thinking prompts at various points are used to encourage dialogical learning, and connections to the pupils' own sense of responsibility and their own thoughts about what is right and wrong are made naturally and reflectively.

The time taken to re-order the classroom for the 'Alley' is not wasted: the sense of drama is enhanced by this, though it all feels quite low key, and easy for the pupils to volunteer to get involved. Follow up tasks (not seen on the film) reinforce the concepts and enable pupils to develop an argument of their own about responsibility.



Running a lesson like this: what do you need to do?

- Prepare to tell a faith story really well, up to the point where a leading character faces a sharp dilemma.
- Set up the classroom as in the illustration so that someone can walk along 'Reflection Alley' and receive advice, ideas or points of view from their peers as they walk.
- Split the class into small groups of 2 or 3 and ask them to decide which member of the group will be a speaker. The others must furnish the speaker with reasons and arguments to say what should be done about the dilemma. They spend 5-6 minutes preparing advice, ideas and opinions. They can write down what they want to say if it helps.
- The walk (in this example by a member of the class in role as the Centurion) is done as a performance for the rest of the class. The walker asks the pupils on either side, 'What should I do?' – zig-zagging up the 'Alley' first one on the left, then one on the right, and so on.
- The walker can ask supplementary questions and have a dialogue with each person. At the end of the walk, they have half a minute in silence, and then say what decision they would make. This is a good starting-point for written work, but is also a good activity by itself.
- Ask pupils to create a dilemma similar to the one explored here, and use the best ones for a further run down Reflection Alley.
- Set a persuasive writing task to follow up the activity: What should the centurion do and why? Why do you disagree with the arguments on the other side?



Use this story script for 'Reflection Alley'

The Centurion's Dilemma

Imagine you are a Roman army soldier from 2000 years ago. You travel all over the world leading your band of soldiers to do Caesar's bidding. You are feared and respected, and for you, the job is great. Even though you're still a young soldier you have been promoted to centurion, in charge of 10 others. You send most of your wages home to the family, and you are enjoying life.

At the moment you are stationed in Judea. Rome has conquered Judea but the local don't like it, and sometimes make trouble. You keep order, and you try to be fair. It feels good to serve in the world's most powerful and successful army.

One day in the officer's quarters another centurion, your best friend, tells you a surprising story. One of his servants – his best servant – was really ill, nearly dying. The centurion tried everything, but no one could help. He heard about a Jewish preacher who was famous as a healer, and went to listen to him (dressed down – out of his uniform!) The preacher was amazing. Your friend asked him 'could you heal my servant?' The preacher smiled, and said he could. 'Go home. God will reward your faith. He will be well.' When the centurion got home, his servant was fine. The preacher is called Jesus of Nazareth.

You talk it over. You are impressed. You think your friend has found someone wonderful.

You go to get your orders for the day. It's a tough job. Governor Pilate has three prisoners who are to be killed by nailing to a cross – crucifixion. It's how Romans keep their enemies under control. You pick six of your best men, and go the cells. The first prisoner is a murderer. So is the second. They scream and swear at you. You feel OK because they are evil men. The third is different. He is to be crucified because he has made the chief priests jealous and they have rigged a trial. He sits calmly, and looks you in the eye. It is Jesus.

You think of your friend. You think perhaps you should refuse to kill this good man. This is not why you joined the army. Then you guess that if you refuse the governor will certainly dismiss you. No more money to send home. He might even kill you. But your conscience says 'it is wrong to kill an innocent good man.' You don't know what to do.

Adapting the strategy:

Reflection Alley, adapted for wide use from the Literacy Strategy version called ‘Conscience Alley’ is a good learning task for groups, enabling them particularly to focus on the skills of handling dilemma and balancing arguments. It’s a bit of fun as well sometimes!

Teachers will notice that any dilemma will do. We have used it for example to explore the dilemma of the Prodigal Son: should the Father give him the money? Later in the story, should the boy continue to eat pig food, or go home? Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s decisions to return to Nazi Germany and struggle against Hitler, and his decision to stop being a Pastor and join a plot to kill Hitler would work well too. Here’s one from the start of Buddhism: should Siddhartha leave his luxury life at the palace and go to seek the truth about suffering? And Aung San Suu Kyi’s dilemma in choosing her political life or her personal life is another example. Many great religious stories have a dilemma at their heart: plan careful story telling to bring this to the point of discussion that the drama activity needs.



Follow on writing activity can be very much improved if you give the pupils some prompts to structure their work. These might do the trick – they can choose two or three from each box.

Beginning	Noticing	Thinking	Reflecting
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What we did in RE today was... ▪ The classroom was set out so that... ▪ There were different ways that everyone could join in... ▪ What I did was... ▪ The best bit of the activity was... 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ In this lesson, other pupils... ▪ The story we heard was all about... ▪ The main character was... ▪ I noticed... ▪ It made me wonder... ▪ I wanted to say... 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ I think the dilemma in the story was... ▪ It was hard to make up your mind because... ▪ The main thing I learned from this was... ▪ If I did this activity again I would... ▪ I admired... 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Sometimes it is hard to make your mind up because... ▪ If I am puzzled, then the best thing to do is... ▪ If I had been in this story, I hope I would have... ▪ The religion we are studying has shown me...

Creative Curriculum Connections

The work here links RE to some other curriculum areas including drama, literacy, Citizenship, PSHE and social and emotional aspects of learning.

Resources

From RE Today (www.retoday.org.uk): Opening Up Christianity and Opening Up Easter (edited by Fiona Moss) are books full of great active learning for primary RE, with all the teacher need to make the lessons happen.

Also see: www.reonline.org.uk

Notes written by Lat Blaylock, with thanks to all the teachers and pupils involved