

The moving image: exploring the spirit through digital video

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Our dream

Jean Vanier, the Canadian who started L'Arche communities for people with special needs, once wrote,

Can we reasonably have a dream of a world ... where people, whatever their race, religion, culture, ability or disability, can find a place or reveal their gifts?

Digital video is for me more than a way of recording what happens in my special school RE classroom. It has developed into a way of expressing very deep concepts, such as transformation, love, healing and hope and a way of celebrating the individuality and spirit of our pupils. Digital special effects can create moments of awe and splendour. The digital videos we have made become part of the pupils' history, to be played again and again. They celebrate who we are because they always spring from the things our pupils say and do, their rituals, their movements and their sense of fun.

The synergy between music and movement in our digital videos leads to a moving experience for viewers. They also give me a platform, as a teacher committed to a powerful form of expressive Religious Education, a way of communicating what I believe to be important. One of the themes that run through our work, for example, is the learning bond between teacher and pupil, described by Prince Charles in a recent speech to teachers in Cambridge as 'magic'.

In many ways, they move away from the trend in information technology, which seems to focus on individualised learning, towards the joy of working

together and the energy and ideas we can generate as a team. I am also blessed to be in a school with a gifted ICT department and I work with a wonderful technician, Paul Catlin, who enjoys the challenges I present with editing. I have a very clear visual sense of what I want, often sparked by an extraordinary event in the classroom, or an uplifting piece of music that tingles in my head. Paul can make the ideas reality through his detailed knowledge of the digital video editing software and his commitment to spending hours to get the right result.

I would like to take you through a tour of some of the key films we have made with some comments.

Shabbat Bride

This simple film uses no digital special effects but records a dance piece made in the classroom by sixth-formers with more complex learning difficulties. Tasleem sweeps into the room dressed as a bride, the boys in the class carrying her white train. They approach the Shabbat table, covered in a white tablecloth, and prepare for Shabbat, the boys putting on a white kippah and then everyone doing the ritual movement of kindling the lights and covering the eyes. The liturgical music, from my synagogue choir, lifts the dance and creates a third effect – images and music combine to create something more. The final note of the music combines with the lifting of the pupils' arms upwards. I was inspired there by movements in Chassidic dance. The film explores the mystical Jewish idea of Shabbat as a bride or queen coming into the house, which I believe to be central to the festival.

Angels

This film, with the same sixth-form class, won the Spirited Arts award from RE Today in 2004.

The *Angels* video came about through a mixture of events. Tommy began to play with the piece of white silk and got excited when he held it next to the fan in the classroom and got a billowing effect. We experimented with the effects of throwing the silk in the air and how it fell. Graham came into the class feeling unhappy and we tried to cheer him up. Tasleem and Alexander were having their usual

friendship game, playing tag, accidentally upsetting each other, then making up.

We began to explore how we feel when we are unhappy and how wonderful it is when someone helps make it better. We tried different movements and expressions to show our feelings. Graham was very expressive and had beautifully fluid movements. Tommy, full of dynamism, was keen to wear the silk around him. When he moved round the classroom, we tried letting him drag it over the children in the group, a symbol for making things change for the better.

At this point, we listened and sang along to the Robbie Williams track. We talked about the idea of angels bringing messages (the Greek word 'angelos' means 'messenger') and the pupils searched for images of angels on the internet. When we went outside to film, everything came to life. We had space and freedom to explore our ideas and the summer sunshine lifted us. The light shining through the trees was later highlighted by digital video, transforming our everyday playground and producing a 'heaven on earth' effect.

The idea in the film is that we all can bring peace and love by kind thoughts and gestures. Anyone can be an angel and transform others' lives. The power is within us, but sometimes someone special has to show us the way.

Darkness into Light

This digital video, which uses a range of visual symbolism, came from our sixth-form course work on Helen Keller.

I initially asked the students each to speak about darkness and light and what these words meant to them. Some of the young people in the group had faced difficulty and loss in their lives, and their ideas about darkness were closely linked to these feelings. War, fighting and killing were among the words they linked with darkness. Light for them seemed to convey the literal idea of sunshine but also families, friends, happiness and kindness.

I then moved to exploring a quotation by Helen Keller. In her writings, she described the

transformational power her teacher Annie Sullivan had on her:

a ray of light from another soul touched the darkness of my mind and I found myself, found the world, found God.

Many in the class had witnessed powerful turning points in the group – when pupils who had chosen not to speak for years had suddenly started talking, for example – and I spoke about these moments as 'a ray of light'. One pupil described learning to read after years of trying as an example of going from darkness into light and another described his pride in learning to swim. The sixth-formers also reflected on people who had helped them and changed their lives in school.

This led to this video. We tried to show, in a metaphorical way, what it is like to go from darkness into light. This is vividly shown by the use of *chromakey* – filming against a blue background and superimposing something else, so that a revelatory moment when pupils open their eyes and see light is shown in glowing yellow. I filmed this against a blue PE mattress and the bumps in it created the otherworldly flickering effects in this sequence, quite by accident.

Our films can often be interpreted in many different ways, and so become a mirror for the viewer. This film is about blindness and disability, but also about revelation and insight, love and support, the role of the teacher and what Jesus means to Christians.

You Raise Me Up

This is the work of a group of 14–16-year-olds, who all love dancing.

This film came about through the pupils' love for the Westlife single, which we sang along to in the classroom. One of the girls was feeling sad and we tried cheering her up and lifting her up. This became the introductory sequence in the film. We have always danced for fun in the classroom and I noticed how the pupils liked the feeling of being spun around, so this was also included as a movement. This was so difficult for many to do as a pair, and what is not shown in the video is the way

in which the children clapped instinctively when their classmates managed to spin each other round without falling on the floor.

The pulling back movement in the dance – the children hold hands and pull backwards – is also about trust and equality. At the end I dance with Jack, one of the pupils who loves to dance. This wasn't planned at all, but we kept it in because it shows the instinctive bond of learning a teacher and pupil can have, and it was a magical moment that is beyond words. The big idea in the film is about how we support each other. The film was made during a time when I had experienced family bereavement and so it was also my story as well.

Together We Blossom

Together We Blossom is a recent film that we have worked on. It is in two parts – *Winter Blues* and *Bounce into Spring*.

On playground duty during winter, I noticed how cold and unhappy some of the pupils were; they desperately wanted to get inside. Even in the classroom, when the heating was slow to come on, they sat very miserably. I began to think about our feelings towards winter and spring, and the changes in our mood when the sun shines. This is something we all seem to feel whatever our ability.

For the first section of our film, my pupils tried to act as if they were very cold, walking slowly with their heads down and rubbing their hands. It suddenly hit me, as we rehearsed this sequence in the playground, how disconnected we are when we are cold, a collection of isolated individuals just thinking about our own discomfort. So the theme of the film also began to be about how hard it is if we are distanced from others and not communicating, compared with the joy of spring and the warmth of giving and sharing.

In the second sequence, *Bounce Into Spring*, Paul and I used some downloadable clips of flowers growing from buds. This actually proved to be tremendously exciting for some children who watched it – one autistic boy started shouting 'Spring is here! Spring is here!' when he saw this sequence. We also used chromakey technology to

show the happy children against a backdrop of daffodils and blossom. The technique picks up any blue in your clothing as well, so one girl was shown slightly transparent with daffodils growing within her, which added to the effect.

A few of the class love ballet, so another sequence in the film is me reading an RE publication when suddenly three pupils dance into the room with garlands, put them on me, and we break into a little joyful ballet sequence! I have also added some of our more complex autistic pupils happily jumping on a mini-trampoline – hence the title of this section. Finally, we show a girl with garlands around her, running into the distance, as a symbol for freedom and spirit.

Welcome Ramadan

This is a film we made last Ramadan. It shows some Muslim children as experts, sharing their feelings about what fasting means to them. They were filmed throughout the month of Ramadan and the film tracks how they were feeling. The girls in it are open and genuinely excited about the onset of Ramadan. One girl talks about God as 'Him Up There', pointing up to the sky and, in an honest and heart-warming moment, explains how during Ramadan there is 'no swearing at boys'. The Eid section is visually startling as the girls wear brightly coloured clothes on a non-uniform day, which contrast with the modest black during the fasting period. It has become a popular teaching resource for us about Islam.

Synchronicity in society

Digital video could be a cold technology but, for us, it is very different. The pupils themselves are always at the centre of what we create – as the educationalist Jerome S Bruner has stated, we should start where the learners are, and build from there. Digital video helps us in RE to do something very important: to reveal our gifts, realise our dreams and to celebrate our spirit. When we take our films and the ideas within them outside of our school and share them with others, we experience a 'synchronicity', to use Jean Vanier's concept (in *Becoming Human*, 1998) in which the lives of those with disabilities are linked with wider society.