

## A Question of Judgement: developing students' evaluation and debating skills

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#### Purpose

- To illustrate the process that a subject leader needs to engage with in order to create a compelling learning experience in and outside the classroom, when implementing the new curriculum.

#### Main emphasis

In these units of work, students were explicitly encouraged to make connections with other curriculum areas ranging from citizenship, English, science and physical education. Focusing on the key concepts of '*beliefs, teachings and sources*' and '*values and commitments*' in the new curriculum, students were expected to create, sustain and deliver insights on a range of ultimate questions to a wider school audience.

#### School profile

Total number of learners	1,495
Age range	11-16
Specialist status	Specialist Arts School and Training School Status
Level 5 and above in key stage 3 tests (2007)	English – 51% Mathematics – 65% Science – 49%
Five A*-C at GCSE (2007)	45%
Special educational needs	515 (34%)

Brampton Manor School is an 11-16 comprehensive in a multi-cultural area of London that has been transformed in the last few years, with a new leadership and management team growing the capacity of staff and students to work together towards higher levels of attainment. Although the School was placed in special measures by Ofsted in 1999, the most recent inspection considered that the school was now 'good, with outstanding features'. Amongst the outstanding features were the leadership and management of the school, teaching and learning and the personal development of the students. Religious Education was one of only two subjects in the school highlighted by inspectors for special praise, as our results at GCSE were above the national average.

## **Question 1: What were we trying to achieve?**

### **What were our learners like at the start?**

When students arrive at the school, their level of attainment in RE is varied. Although some students demonstrate ability at levels expected by the Newham Agreed Syllabus, the vast majority work below level 4, and so have not demonstrated the ability, for example, to make links between the beliefs, teachings and sources of different religious groups or show how they are connected to believer's lives. Evaluative and empathic skills too, are underdeveloped, with students falling short of the ability to ask questions about the moral decisions people make and to suggest what might happen as a result of different decisions, including those made with reference to a variety of beliefs and values.

The RE department felt that some compelling learning experiences should be designed that would challenge students to improve their achievement in RE so that many could demonstrate increased confidence in the different conceptual strands of RE and think at higher levels too.

The RE department was really committed to developing students' independent learning and high level thinking and speaking skills too as they were often unable to express opinions based on drawing conclusions on moral decisions and ultimate questions. Students are, however very keen to take part and engage with their learning in Religious Education. Overall, we see the role of the teacher evolving into the facilitator, whereby the students ask and answer challenging questions rather than relying on the teacher for answers.

### **What differences did we want to see in our learners?**

In terms of *knowledge, understanding and skills* we wanted students to explicitly draw upon personal experiences and use these to balance arguments for or against key statements of belief. To further enhance the impact of personal reflection we wanted students to draw upon religious and non-religious beliefs, teachings and sources and expert opinions to improve the validity of their arguments. With this focus the students developed the skills of independent and group research as well as presentation skills when putting arguments forward to the wider school community.

In terms of *attitudes and behaviour*, we wanted to encourage the concept of challenging all our students to think creatively, and to learn from their peers. To take the level of debate and thinking to new heights students were encouraged to argue for statements of belief with which they didn't necessarily agree. This ensured that students truly had to think outside the box in terms of planning and articulating a convincing argument. Students were also given the task of having to listen effectively so that they could counter arguments used by different believers.

## **Question 2: How did we organise learning to achieve our aims?**

### **How did we set about making a change?**

In order to set about making the changes we initially responded to the 'student-voice' groups that expressed an interest in high level debate. It was also a response to student questions being raised in Year 10 RE lessons across the department. Students were expressing a need to discuss things further and the hour GCSE lesson was not always providing enough time for them to engage in in-depth research based discussion.

Our students respond well to a kinaesthetic style of learning so we felt that this was an ideal opportunity to increase the levels of enthusiasm across the wider curriculum, whilst also raising the profile of RE across the school.

The department was very conscious that consistency of delivery would be vital to make this work so we set about working collaboratively to plan a sequence of lessons scaffolding the skills needed to develop high levels of debate. It was important for us to model good practice as well as developing the questioning appropriately, starting with knowledge, understanding, application, analysis, synthesis and finally the critical evaluation questioning.

The lessons were based around philosophical enquiry, focusing on ethical issues such as *'Religion has led to an immoral society and needs to be restrained by the law'*, *'When justice does not prevail, using injustice to gain justice should go unpunished'*, and *'God is accountable for personal suffering, and the church is God's representative so it should be brought to justice'*. These statements were staggered in terms of students being introduced to Utilitarianism, situation ethics and Kantian theories earlier in the year.

### **What changes did you make?**

With a focus on kinaesthetic approaches we decided to develop a court room drama setting. We purchased full barrister costumes, judge outfits, high quality lecterns and ballot boxes. With the characters they were representing students were encouraged to use appropriate language when 'proposing' or 'opposing' their arguments.

The department was also keen to incorporate ICT and to make use of the ICT available within classrooms and across the school for independent study. In the lessons the interactive white boards were used to aid the delivery of the lesson, and students were encouraged and guided to do independent research to reach the highest levels. This was made explicit when the success criteria were shared with the students in the lessons prior to the activity and research project being set.

Students were enthused by the nature of the tasks, as they were delivered with explicit links to the development of leadership skills, which link heavily with the Active Citizenship and Duke of Edinburgh Award, which many of the students took part in, as timetabled lessons.

These lessons were delivered in a six week time slot of one hour a week, by the Key Stage 4 team, consisting of four teachers, two specialist, two non-specialists, who were, however confident in delivering the materials prepared as they were part of the planning process. Normal timetabled classrooms were used for the lessons one to three. Lesson four was delivered in an ICT room, so that students could access the internet for the target research activity. Lesson five was delivered in a communal hall so that students could deliver arguments to visiting classes, who were invited to come along, e.g. science group of Year 9 students invited to engage in debates surrounding 'Science v Religion'. Lesson six was the evaluation lesson taught back in normal classrooms.

When students planned their arguments they were given a clear structure for debate. They would have to present using own personal opinions, together with common sense arguments all balanced out with religious arguments, statistics and expert opinions. All this linked explicitly to the shared success criteria.

The lessons were also successful with students as the students could see the clear aims and objectives of the tasks they were being set, and by using clear models of assessment, with

Talking Partners for peer assessment and coaching as well as sharing the success criteria very early on in the lessons so that students were confident in how to perform to the highest levels.

The hope was that the role of the teacher would be that of playing 'Devil's Advocate' rather than leading the lessons, becoming more the facilitator where students ask and answer challenging question for themselves.

Links were made with citizenship through the active citizenship route of completing a project which would impact on the wider school community. Links were made with science in terms of pupils needing to draw upon their prior knowledge of scientific studies when debating evolution, the big bang and genetic engineering. The obvious links with English were built through the idea of speaking and listening as well as both learning areas using the same terminology when debating. The six week completion of this course could also be counted as an aspect of the Duke of Edinburgh course being run by the PE department.

### **Question 3: How well have we achieved our aims?**

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

Students are now using appropriate language to support their arguments and are answering questions with more confidence. They also present the skill of scaffolding the argument before articulation. They make more use of their imagination; drawing upon personal experiences and enhanced knowledge and understanding of religious/belief perspectives in their work. They are, for example, producing higher quality questions and suggesting more complete possible answers to those questions from a variety of perspectives.

Some classes have since set up a questions board in the classroom, to which they add post-it notes throughout the lesson of questions they would like answered, and at the end of the lessons students voluntarily take different post-its as additional independent learning tasks, to be fed back in the next lesson, as a starter activity.

In terms of *knowledge, understanding and skills*, students have been able to demonstrate their investigative skills and use a wider range of sources. Many more are able to explain the differing impacts of religious beliefs and teachings on individuals and communities, particularly the local community. Most students reflected and evaluated their own and others' beliefs on the issues being debated, and a majority were able to express their own beliefs and ideas in the light of their findings.

In terms of *attitudes and behaviour*, students have been willing to learn from others, even when others' views might be different from their own. For example, most students listened carefully to views expressed by different believers and said they had, at times seen a different side of the issue of key questions being debated.

In addition students have become more sensitive to the impact of their ideas and behaviour on other people. All the staff involved have noticed several examples of this increased sensitivity in student interactions both in and out of the classroom. Some students have used the newly acquired skills in subjects such as English, where the department are now using our project focus to enhance the level of debating in their own learning area.

Overall, students are engaged and challenged. The statements below sum up the shared feelings in such lessons.

“This is very hard work miss.”

“I don’t know what I think any more.”

“I thought I knew but I don’t any more.”

“I’m enjoying this lesson, I’m learning lots.”

The staff evaluated these lessons as giving them an opportunity to guide rather than instruct the students, and to observe them working hard to develop their evaluation and debating skills, hence reaching the desired outcome of being the facilitator. They also noted how students became more confident, passionate and independent with research and participation.