

## Case Study: Investigating the nature of spirituality through art

**Frome Community College: Cathy Lyall**

### Purpose

- To help students explore differences and overlap between the 'spiritual' and 'material' worlds;
- To enable students to reflect on and express their own beliefs about, and understanding of, what may be termed 'spiritual', through the medium of art;
- To help students engage in collaborative work, independent thinking, questioning and reflection.

### Main emphasis

This series of lessons will form part of a foundation unit in which students will already have looked at skills needed in RE and Art. The learning focuses on the different ways in which spirituality is expressed, with a particular focus on Buddhist art.

### School profile

Total number of learners	Year 9 ( 400 approx)
Age range	13-14
Specialist status	Media Arts
Level 5 and above in key stage 3 tests (2007)	tbc
Five A*-C at GCSE (2007)	50%
Special educational needs	tbc

**Our school** is a very large community college in Somerset, (1,600 students). It takes its students from Year 9 upwards, so there is only one year of KS3. It is not very ethnically diverse but serves a mixture of rural and Frome town families. The college has a creative specialist focus.

### Question 1: What are we trying to achieve?

#### What are our learners like?

The students come from two different middle schools after Year 8 and have only one year left of KS3, so RE needs to be thought provoking and engaging in order to keep them interested and to help them build the skills required for GCSE success.

Students are not very independent learners and need to develop skills to be able to work on their own. They lack higher level philosophical and critical thinking skills. Although they have studied other religions in the middle schools they do not have great sensitivity, empathy or understanding of other cultures and faiths. They arrive with end-of-Year 8 levels which mostly range from level 3c to 6c.

### **What differences do we want to see?**

We wanted our students to gain a more sophisticated understanding of the difference and overlap between the spiritual and material world. We hoped that they would think *more critically* about different concepts of spirituality; that they would make *connections* between spirituality and art and *explain* why and how art can be spiritual.

In addition, we wanted our students to *reflect* on their own spiritual responses to religious art and to *express* their own personal understanding of spirituality.

In order to address the need for them to develop personal, learning and thinking skills we wanted students to engage in collaborative work, independent thinking, questioning and reflection.

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

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

At meetings with the Head of Art and the school curriculum manager, connections were made between the RE and Art programmes of study. We linked two key concepts in the Somerset Agreed Syllabus: 'Exploring ways of expressing religious belief and ideas' (c.f. 'expressing meaning' in the QCA non-statutory programmes of study) and 'Exploring the world in which we live' (c.f. 'meaning, purpose and truth' in the QCA non-statutory programmes of study) with four in the Art programmes: produce imaginative images, artefacts that are both original and of value; engage with a range of images and artefacts from different contexts, recognising the varied characteristics of different cultures and use them to inform their creating and making; engage with ideas, images and artefacts, and identify how values and meanings are conveyed, developing their own views and expressing reasoned judgement.

Using these connections as a basis for achieving the differences we wanted to see, we worked out some aims for a joint project. We hoped that, by the end of the project, students would be able to:

- know how spirituality and belief can be expressed through art;
- understand how spirituality is expressed in religion;
- think about their own 'spirituality' and beliefs;
- express their own spiritual beliefs and ideas through the medium of art.

We decided that the best way to achieve this was to devote a series of separate RE and art lessons to the project so that subject knowledge and skills could be built towards a cross-curricular day when RE and Art students would work on a piece of art that could express either (a) what we mean by the term 'spiritual or (b) a student's own personal spirituality. We decided that students could choose from a range of media – collage, painting, cartoon and

so on to complete the assignment and to make use of all their ideas from the previous lessons.

The key question for the joint project was to be **‘How can art convey spiritual meaning and truths?’**

We then worked out what key processes, range and content and curriculum opportunities would be covered in RE and Art lessons (see Lesson structure below), and what National Curriculum PLTS (personal, learning and thinking skills) would be addressed. We hoped that the project would help students to be more reflective, independent and creative in their learning.

In principle, Art teachers would help students with the art skills and the creative aspects of the project and RE staff would help students reflect on spirituality and meaning in their work. We planned to motivate students through use of Philosophy for children (P4C) activities, such as the ‘Community of Enquiry’, which aims to engage learners by allowing them to lead the learning and ask the questions.

We aimed to maintain high standards by enabling students to take responsibility for their learning with the teacher becoming the facilitator for philosophical and creative enquiry in both RE and Art. Staff in both subjects would need to work collaboratively on the end project, allowing them to share their expertise and help students to create an outstanding piece of work.

In order to make the changes we wanted, we asked our curriculum managers to support our proposals to:

- use 3 one hour art / RE lessons in preparation for the final project;
- train involved staff on the basics of a P4C Community of Enquiry and on aspects of learning to learn;
- ensure that staff are timetabled in a way that allows them to work with their classes on the final art work project;
- ensure art rooms and a range of art media will be available for the final project, e.g., Cameras, paint, other art materials.

Assessment would take place through a series of self assessment questions on students’ knowledge and understanding of spirituality and belief, their creative and imaginative skills, their practical art skills, their ability to express and justify their ideas. They would set themselves a level and set targets for their final piece of work in line with those in the agreed syllabus (which are similar to the Non-Statutory National Framework for RE levels and with the national curriculum orders for Art). Work would then be jointly marked by both the RE and art teacher according to the following success criteria:

**Students will:**

- have an understanding of the different expressions of spirituality and belief (Art 1.4b RE 3h);
- have led their own learning and questions on the topic;

- have displayed skills of collaboration, questioning, critical thinking, creativity, imagination, and reflection;
- have learnt how to express their imagination and creative ideas through an art medium (2.2d both);
- have developed an appreciation and understanding of art in religion (Buddhist Mandalas) (Art 3c, RE 3b);
- have had an opportunity to display their own understanding of an RE concept through the medium of Art and understand the links between the two subjects ( 4g both);
- Be motivated, engaged and enthused by this cross curricular project.

(PLTS – reflective, independent and creative learning throughout)

Evidence for their achievement would be gathered from:

- the final piece of art work with a reflection on its purpose and meaning;
- students' self-assessment of their work and attitudes;
- students' notes from discussions;
- students' work from preparatory lessons;
- students' written answers to set questions.

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

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

Students are motivated because they have been given a safe and controlled environment in which to explore their own spirituality, thoughts and beliefs and be able to express them in a choice of media. For most it has been a personal learning experience that is relevant to them from any starting point. The work is valued by them and their peers.

All students:

- developed their knowledge and understanding of what the word spiritual can mean
- and how it can be expressed through religion and art;
- reflected on their own thoughts and beliefs and expressed them through an art form.

Some students:

- were able to identify a number of different life situations in which the word spirituality is relevant;
- understood how spirituality relates to both the objective and subjective world;
- identified and understood the purpose and meaning of spiritual truth through art in religion and other art forms;
- developed a deeper personal understanding of their own spirituality and related it to religious or philosophical ideas in the art work they produced.

## **The nature of spirituality through RE and Art: structure of lessons and curriculum links**

### **1. The RE Lessons**

#### **Spiritual Truth**

Students are introduced to the key question: 'What can be learnt from art about the expression of spirituality?' They investigate the concept of 'spirituality', through, e.g., 'Stilling' exercise and questionnaire on reflection.

Students are shown a series of images each reflecting a different aspect of spirituality: emotion, language, physical, self-awareness, relationships, creativity, conscience, awe and wonder, sacred or holy, transcendence. They are provided with a grid with these key terms on and have to match each picture to the key term and next to each one have to write what they think the spiritual nature of each of these is. Students are then shown abstract images from Art that could reflect aspects of spirituality and they repeat the activity to give them a more sophisticated understanding of spirituality.

They consider the question, 'What are the different ways in which people express their spiritual side?' and put their ideas into diagrammatic form. Other questions are investigated, such as, 'Where is spirituality to be found?' and 'Do you have to be religious to be spiritual?' Students will write up their answers to these questions.

#### **Meditation and the Mandala and Prayer and Orthodox Icons**

Students read about Buddhist meditation and the use of a Mandala in meditation and Christian Prayer and the use of Icons in the Orthodox tradition.

They investigate and answer questions on the how both these art forms are used to help spiritual reflection, prayer and meditation and portray spiritual or religious truths. Plenary – students create their own Mandala or Icon – within a frame write what spiritual truths that they would like to convey in their own Mandala or Icon.

#### **Reflection and Community of Enquiry**

What spiritual truth can be found in creativity?  
Show a piece of religious art that provokes question, debate, discussion.  
I know, I think, I feel, I want to know, cards.  
Community of enquiry – discussion (P4C skill they will have done in an earlier unit).

#### **Key Processes in RE (non-statutory programmes of study):**

**2.1e** interpret a range of sources and forms of religious and spiritual expression from a variety of contexts;

**2.2d** express their own beliefs and ideas, using a variety of forms of expression, including creative forms and reasoned arguments.

#### **Range and content:**

**3h** expressions of spirituality: how and why human self-understanding and experiences are expressed in a variety of forms;

**3b** Buddhism.

**Curriculum opportunities:**

**4g** explore connections between RE and other subject areas.

## **2. The Art lessons**

### **Research spirituality through art**

Students look at a range of artists and images and explore how they express their thoughts, spiritual side, beliefs and ideas through their work.

They choose one piece of work or artist – in their scrap book around images, they write about the art works meaning and purpose and what they think the artist was trying to convey.

### **Buddhist Mandalas**

Students look at a range of mandalas and icons and explore the colours, images and styles and interpret what they represent.

They learn about the different techniques used to make them, silk painting, sand mandalas, gold leafing, form and structure of faces.

Using their written ideas from the RE lessons, students then create their own mandala or icon.

### **Reflection on own ideas**

Students participate in an imaginative stilling exercise and use their reflections from this activity plus their ideas about spirituality to prepare for production of their own piece of art work.

They begin their final project in a scrapbook form with colours, images and sketches.

### **Key processes in Art:**

**2.1d** draw to express perception and invention, to communicate feelings, experience and ideas, and for pleasure;

**2.2d** analyse, select and question critically, making reasoned choices when developing personal work.

### **Range and content:**

**3c** study a range of artefacts from contemporary, historical, personal and cultural contexts.

### **Curriculum opportunities:**

**4g** make links between art and design and other subjects and areas of the curriculum.

# Case Study

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