

## Creation through Art: Lessons for Today's World

### Woodhouse Business and Enterprise College: Alison Clark

#### Purpose

The purpose of the study was to explore the symbolism and language of the biblical creation story, and its relevance to the modern world through a study of some modern artistic interpretations of the story.

#### Main Emphasis

The study enabled us to link with art and drama. The aim was to engage students in a creative way with the material, and to reflect on their own ideas and attitudes to the world around them.

#### School Profile

Total number of learners	1,114
Age range	11-18
Specialist status	Business and Enterprise
Level 5 and above in key stage 3 tests (2007)	66.7%
Five A*-C at GCSE (2007)	51%
Special educational needs	224 (19%)

Woodhouse Business and Enterprise College was opened by Margaret Thatcher in 1971. It was, at the time, Tamworth's first purpose built comprehensive school. The school gained specialist Business and Enterprise status in 2006.

The majority of the students transfer from one of the five local feeder schools at age 12. A smaller number come from other primary schools. There is an Upper School which currently has around 120 students, many of whom go on to higher education when leaving Woodhouse.

Religious Education is taught throughout the school. The Staffordshire Agreed Syllabus is followed. Students cover topics such as Belief in God, Worship, Pilgrimage, Rites of Passage, Founders and Holy Books and Commitment. There are two specialist teachers and a team of non-specialists who teach in lower school. GCSE students follow OCR syllabus B (Ethics and Philosophy). Results have been consistently above the school and county average for the past 4 years. The subject is also offered at A level.

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

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

Previously students had followed a unit of work on the environment covering a variety of creation stories from different belief systems. These included Christianity, Hinduism and stories from China, Africa and Australia. Students had then examined how these stories influenced the beliefs, attitudes and actions towards the environment before leading to work on students' own attitudes towards a range of environmental issues. The emphasis had primarily been on knowledge, with understanding and evaluation not having the same importance of emphasis.

Coupled with this the department has undergone two years of staffing problems, resulting in much of KS3 RE being taught by non-specialised cover teachers. Many of our students had not had continuity of staff and activities have not always been presented in an inspiring or challenging way. This led many students at KS3, particularly Year 9, to have a low opinion of the subject.

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

One of our goals in rethinking our approach to this topic was to improve enjoyment and engage the students more actively in their learning. Linking RE with another subject they enjoyed in the school was one part of this.

Another aim was to encourage students to engage with the subject, and especially the topic chosen, and to see the relevance both to the modern world and to themselves of a story from thousands of years ago. Our students have a natural curiosity and are not afraid to ask questions, challenge ideas and try new things, so we wanted to encourage them to use these in a new sequence of RE lessons.

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

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

The main focus of this study was to explore the meaning and symbolism of the biblical Creation story through art, and relate it to the modern world. In terms of RE, we would link this with the key concepts of '*expressing meaning*' (AT1) and '*meaning, purpose and truth*' (AT2). In art and design, the key concepts being addressed were '*creativity*' and '*cultural understanding*'. Together with the art and design department we agreed a key question that would provide some motivation for students in carrying out their investigation and experimentation with forms of expression. The question was, *What can we learn from art about the meaning and purpose of the world?*

At the start students were divided into groups of 4 or 5 and set a time limit to read the first story of creation in Genesis 1:1 – 2:3, look for what they believed to be the main themes and present the story in the form of a drama. No props were allowed except for chairs, and the classroom lights remained on. Shakespeare summoned images of windy dark Scotland on a daylight stage in London through the power of words, and we wanted our students to work at being equally creative!

Some groups chose the obvious route of selecting a narrator and acting out the each day, but many demonstrated incredible imagination, employing mime, dance, song and even a parody of Big Brother: "Day one in Big God's house..." Each group performed their

interpretation to the rest of the class. The repetition of the story and the physical act of performing helped to focus students on the possible meanings of the verses. This also led to discussions about the difference between seeing the story in a symbolic way or whether the days should be taken literally.

Students were then given a copy of 'Onement One' by Barnett Newman.<sup>1</sup> Newman was an American artist, the son of Jewish Russian immigrants. His work is characterised by lines of colour running down his work which he called 'zips' which divide and unite each composition. Many of his paintings have a Jewish theme. For Newman the zip was an image which destroys the void, the chaos before the creation. Light is also a symbol of creation for Newman. Other paintings that could be used include 'The Command', 'Adam', 'Eve' and 'Moment'. Newman himself saw the title of 'Onement One' as symbolic. In Judaism the Day of Atonement (at-onement) is when a person repents of their sins, and is thus symbolically renewed. Newman saw his work, as an artist, renewed with this series of paintings.

The painting was discussed, in particular how it represented the first day of creation – the colour red representing life, the lighter colour layered over the dark and how the 'zip' separated and joined the two parts of the picture. These elements were linked with the creation story. Students were then asked to produce small symbolic pictures for each day using the ideas in Newman's work as a starting point. The colours they chose had to reflect the symbolism of each day and how separation and unification was used in the story. Their choices had to be justified.

The study of the second biblical creation story (Genesis 2:4 – 3:24) was explored further through a video (BBC Animated Bible series 'Noah and Creation') showing the incidents which led to the fall of human kind. We then encouraged students to list the ways in which the 'good' world that God created in Genesis 1, may have been 'spoiled' by human beings ever since.

In groups students explored 'Adam and Eva', a woodcut by John Muafangejo.<sup>2</sup> The structure of this picture shows the world as a fragile bubble about to be pierced by the masked Satan. God watches on in the sky, concerned but unable to act without compromising human free will. Students were encouraged to look carefully at the different elements of the picture and decide what they thought was happening, and to be prepared to show how the artist had used symbolism to show the event in question: the wholeness and completeness of the garden, the mask hiding Satan's true intentions, the shared responsibility of the fall between Adam and Eve, the link between the word Eden and the Hebrew word for delicate.

The shape and structure of the woodcut provided a framework for students to think about the world they found themselves in now and how it might fall short of the ideal set by God in the creation stories. They drew circles in the middle of paper, and using collage, drawings, and written words showed concepts and objects from the modern world they thought would have a place in a new Garden of Eden, representing a perfect world. Round the outside, removed

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<sup>1</sup> See Cooling, M., 2000, *The Bible Through Art: A Resource for Teaching Religious Education and Art: From Genesis to Esther*, RMEP. Teachers wishing to use reproductions of Barnett Newman's work should be aware of copyright restrictions and see the notes in Margaret Cooling's book for details.

<sup>2</sup> Teachers wishing to use reproductions of John Muafangejo's work should be aware of copyright restrictions and see the notes in Margaret Cooling's book and <http://www.johnmuafangejo.com> for details.

from the circle they put images to represent things in the modern world they thought spoiled the perfection.

Various discussions began about whether money should go inside or outside the circle, whether some things could go in both, if you got rid of all disease and illness there would be no need for medical services or medication. This enabled students to begin to grasp the difficult concept of perfection and what that might mean in real terms.

In order to demonstrate their ability at level 4, when the individual collages were completed, students wrote a response and explanation of their work. They were asked to justify their choices of what had gone inside and outside the circle. Where there were many ideas to choose from students selected the ones they believed were the most important. In order to gain a higher level their responses had to go on to ask some questions about the meaning and purpose of the creation stories and suggest how their decisions about what would go into a new Garden of Eden might provide some meanings and purposes that relate to their own and others' lives.

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

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

Overall the students responded positively to the work. They demonstrated a significant progress in both learning about and learning from religion when measured against their previous attainment. The move away from the knowledge approach of the previous work to a more concept led, and active approach was welcomed by students.

The quality of the work they produced was high, with many students achieving levels 5 and 6 in AT2. Interest and enjoyment in the subject were better at the end of the unit of work. Written work showed a good level of response, with students thinking about the justifications for their choices, and reflecting on the world they lived in now and how they would like to see it improved.