

## Music and meaning: interpretation of a variety of forms of religious and spiritual expression

**Grangefield School and Technology College: Claire-Marie Cuthbert**

### Purpose

- To develop students' understanding of the many different ways in which religious beliefs and values are expressed and to practise the skills of listening, analysis and evaluation;
- To harness students' imaginations to interpret a range of forms of religious and spiritual expression from a variety of contexts.

### Main emphasis

Students studied the different ways in which religious beliefs and values are expressed through the buildings, art, music, prayers and rituals of different Christian denominations. The key concept '*expressing meaning*' in the revised programme of study for RE was the primary focus (AT1), but attention was also paid to '*questions of meaning, purpose and truth*' in looking at why traditions vary, change over time and are influenced by culture (AT2). A range of interactive learning strategies, including an investigation into the variety of different forms of music to explore the way people express their faith, provided the compelling learning experiences within the unit of work.

### School profile

Total number of learners	1,247
Age range	11-16
Specialist status	Technology College
Level 5 and above in key stage 3 tests (2007)	68%
Five A*-C at GCSE (2007)	63%
Special educational needs	tbc

Grangefield School and Technology College is a larger than average school and serves a large area of Stockton-on-Tees. This area encompasses a wide range of economic and social conditions. Just over half the students come from homes in areas designated for neighbourhood renewal and the proportion of students eligible for free school meals is well above the national average. Around 10% of the students are from minority ethnic groups and around 7% of students have a first language that is not English. The proportion of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is around two-thirds of the national average. In a recent Ofsted inspection the school was described as 'good' in all areas.

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

### **Identifying the priorities for development**

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

When students arrive at the school, their level of attainment in RE is very varied. Grangefield School has more than 16 feeder primary schools. A minority of students demonstrate ability at levels expected by the Stockton Agreed Syllabus. The baseline assessment scores conducted at the beginning of year 7 show the vast majority of students are working at level 3, and so have not demonstrated the ability, for example, to express religious beliefs (ideas, feelings, etc) in a range of styles and words used by believers and suggest what they mean. Evaluative and empathic skills too, are under-developed, with students falling short of the ability to ask questions about the meaning and purpose of life and to suggest what answers might be given by members of different religious groups or individuals.

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

The RE department felt that some compelling learning experiences could 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 at higher levels too. The RE department also wanted to breakdown traditional stereotypes of religious people and their worship.

In terms of *knowledge, understanding and skills*, we wanted students to investigate how and why spirituality is expressed in a variety of forms. The emphasis was on Christian denominational worship, so we particularly wanted students to be aware of the diverse nature of Christianity and the way that this is expressed. We wanted students to use analytical and evaluative skills to interpret different styles of worship through the music they use in liturgical and non-liturgical services.

In terms of *attitudes and behaviour*, we wanted students to develop respect for and sensitivity to others, particularly those whose traditions and beliefs differ from their own. In addition we wanted them to become increasingly sensitive to the impact of their ideas and behaviour on other people. The unit of work would take learning outside of the classroom and involve a cross-curricular dimension, in order to encourage more creative responses and greater engagement with the area of study.

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

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

In order to engage and motivate students we responded to the 'student-voice' questionnaires that were issued at the beginning of the academic year. Students expressed an interest in learning outside the classroom environment and the use of technology in production of class work. As Grangefield School is a Technology College and a City Learning Centre is on site this was the basis of the planning for this unit of work. Good cross-curricular links with the music department were also established to ensure that RE could take place in places other than the RE classroom.

The changes we wanted to make to our approaches to teaching and learning involved much more of a focus on the key concepts recommended in the new statutory framework, namely, '*expressing meaning*' (AT1) and '*questions of meaning, purpose and truth*' (AT2). The

department also wanted to establish a more collaborative and cross-curricular approach which would make the new scheme of work more engaging and imaginative.

One of the features of the sequence in learning was to increase students' opportunities for reflection and to appreciate the very diverse nature and differences between denominational groups. They would therefore have increased opportunities to examine different sources of authority and how they might inform people's lives as well as how people may express this in worship. The principal religion studied here would be Christianity but later in the academic year students would be given the opportunity to investigate the impact of different religions and beliefs. The key question we wanted students to respond to was *'Are different Christian groups expressing different kinds of 'truth' when they worship?'*

To enable the unit of work to be a success planning between the Teesside City Learning Centre and the music department had to be carefully engineered. Clear aims and objectives were stipulated in both areas to enable students to progress through the unit of work. Time would be spent in the music department listening to various pieces of music from Gregorian chant to gospel music. Time was also allocated in the Teesside City Learning Centre so students could have access to specialist IT equipment which would enable them to produce an assessed piece of work at the end of the unit.

In order to encourage a more imaginative and creative approach, we made a connection between the key RE process to 'interpret a range of forms of religious and spiritual expression from a variety of contexts' with the key processes in music to 'analyse, review, evaluate and compare pieces of music'.

Once they had listened to Christian music from a range of denominational traditions, students would investigate (a) the main religious themes of the music and the textual sources of inspiration for the composer and (b) its use and meaning for Christians today. Then, in the Teesside City Learning Centre, they would design and produce a double CD sleeve for two contrasting pieces of denominational worship music.

Students would then write a music review for their chosen pieces of music. All students had to justify their designs, and identify the similarities and differences between the selected pieces of music. They had also to give their own views about the questions and themes raised by the music.

Teachers and students would measure their progress against the level statements for *'expressing meaning'* and *'questions of meaning, purpose and truth'* in the Agreed Syllabus. The expectation was that students would reach level 5 in both attainment target strands, showing that they could:

- use a wide religious vocabulary in suggesting reasons for the similarities and differences in forms of religious, spiritual and moral expression found within different Christian denominations; and
- ask questions about the meaning and purpose of life expressed in the selected music and suggest answers which relate to the search for truth and their own and others' lives.

In music, assessment could relate to how well students could 'evaluate how venue, occasion and purpose affect the way music is created, performed and heard' (level 5).

The project would involve students in investigation of several cross-curricular dimensions, particularly through addressing issues of identity and diversity. Through this sequence of learning, students would also have the opportunity to practice a number of cross-curricular skills, particularly those of empathy, analysis, reflection, review and evaluation.

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

#### **What differences are evident?**

#### **What impact have we made on our learners?**

We hope that students will make significant progress in relation to the baseline assessment scores achieved at the beginning of the academic year. A move away from a knowledge based approach towards that of concepts and skills should result in students' enhanced knowledge and understanding of religious / belief perspectives in their work. We expect this to be exemplified in the rise in level 4 and level 5 grades at the end of year 7.

Further success will be evident if students are more engaged in their class work and the standard of homework also rises with the introduction of more creative and imaginative tasks.