

Resolving Conflict

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Purpose

The purpose of this study was to develop ways to motivate and engage lower ability students and those with special educational needs in RE and other Humanities subjects.

Main emphasis

The emphasis for this pilot was to embed a skills based, conceptual curriculum within Years 7 and 8 in RE, Geography and History. Yewlands College had already piloted a similar scheme with students, which was skills rather than content led and following its success the decision was made to trial a similar curriculum within Humanities. Students in Year 7 and Year 8 were timetabled to be in Humanities for four consecutive periods enabling us, as teachers, to 'banish the bell' and try more creative and ambitious projects.

School profile

Total number of learners	987
Age range	11-16
Specialist status	Technology
Level 5 and above in key stage 3 tests (2007)	Maths 51% Science 52% English 47%
Five A*-C at GCSE (2007)	41%
Special educational needs	30%

Yewlands Technology College is an improving school in Sheffield. The majority of students are white and come from a low socio-economic background. Unemployment is often second or third generation and only 20% of our students will go on to further education with only 5% going onto University. Very few students follow any religion with some displaying intolerant attitudes. Overcoming misconceptions is a big focus for the RE Department.

The Religious Studies Department at Yewlands College has undergone massive reform in recent years. The Department has one specialist teacher and uses only one non-specialist to deliver the KS4 curriculum. Students in Year 7 receive RE through Humanities lessons (delivered by the History and Geography departments). Students in Year 8 and 9 traditionally receive one 50-minute lesson of RE per week. Full Course GCSE RS (Edexcel) was introduced in September 2006 with an intake of 18 students. This grew to 24 in 2007. All students in the "X" half (higher ability) of Years 10 and 11 sit the Short Course exam.

The Department follows the Sheffield Locally Agreed Syllabus, which was last reviewed in 2004. The Syllabus is due to be revised again over the next academic year and all Heads of Department across the city will be involved in the consultation process.

Question 1: What are we trying to achieve?

At Yewlands College we work hard to motivate our lower ability students. Our intention with the Skills for Learning programme was to invigorate and excite students by making RE both relevant and meaningful for them whilst equipping them with learning skills that would enable them to become learners for life. It was decided when the pilot began in September 2006 that we would focus on students in Year 7 and then build the Skills for Learning programme into the ongoing curriculum throughout Key Stage 3. Our overall aim was to equip students with the skills necessary to meet and exceed their target grades both in Short and Full Course RS. We also hoped that in future more students would opt for GCSE Full Course RS. The students that are the focus of this case study are currently in Year 8, having completed Year 7's programme.

What were our learners like at the start?

Many of our learners at the beginning of the pilot were de-motivated and disengaged, reluctant to see the relevance of a subject like RE to their own lives and experiences. Many held very strong opinions as to what they thought about certain issues, which they were unafraid to express, but their level of expression was low and students were unable to substantiate WHY they thought something when pushed. This was particularly prevalent when it came to issues of racism, prejudice and discrimination with many students convinced of their own opinions but unwilling to hear alternative points of view. It was for this reason that we decided to tackle the concept of 'Resolving Conflict' as it fitted really well into RE, History and Geography – the cross curricular links could be made authentically but we could tackle the different subjects discreetly and meaningfully with the intention of making maximum impact on our learners.

The students (90 in total) were a mixture of Levels 1 – 4, with a significant number removed from lessons for either behavioural workshops or reading lessons. Behaviour was an issue and strong boundaries were necessary as well as consistent application of the school sanction policies. Bad behaviour often increased if students perceived what they were doing to be "boring" so it was important that the tasks we planned would be suitably active to hold their interest. Students were generally reluctant to attempt tasks on their own, preferring to be "spoon-fed" by a teacher. Literacy levels were low as were communication skills. It was apparent that in order to make a difference to these students we needed to rethink the way that we were teaching them.

In order to find out more about my learners I distributed a 'student voice' questionnaire to ascertain how they felt about RE and what sort of learning experiences they enjoyed. Sadly, few students could highlight a positive memory of an RE lesson and when asked what they didn't enjoy about RE the responses varied from 'everything', to 'writing' to 'learning about other religions that aren't ours'. Responses as to the sort of learning they enjoyed were also limited. All students said they enjoyed videos and many students said they enjoyed creative activities. A large proportion said 'not much writing', many enjoyed 'working with their mates'.

What differences did we want to see in our learners?

Our main priority for improvement for our learners was to see them progress in the eight key skills that had been highlighted by Yewlands College and also across our feeder primary schools: Communication, Helping Others to Learn, Teamwork, Problem Solving, Creativity, Decision Making, Self Management and Self Esteem. The project in Humanities was to be

part of a much bigger initiative, which saw Yewlands College as part of a 'family of schools' enabling our students to make the transition across all key stages more successfully.

All lessons and learning experiences would relate in some way to one or more of these skills so that students could map their own progression on their individual learning pathways across all Humanities lessons. It was important to ensure that appropriate content was selected to support the aims of developing these key skills and challenging students' misconceptions.

Through the flexibility of the Skills for Learning programme there was the potential to make a real impact on the students since there was no longer a need to limit lessons to 50 minutes – instead having a whole morning which would provide more time to plan inventive lessons that would capture the imaginations of learners. Development of the 8 key skills within the students would benefit their overall education – not just in RE, but across the whole school. Overall, we aimed to open the minds of our learners – to make them aware of alternative points of view and to appreciate the diverse culture that we live in, both in our local area but also in the wider world. Above all, we wanted them to understand empathy. The success of that would be one more measure of success for the project.

Question 2: How will we organise learning to achieve our aims?

How did we set about making a change?

The key question we decided to tackle for this sequence of RE learning experiences was *'To what extent are the problems in today's world caused by a division of "Us and Them"?'*

We decided to tackle the key concepts of Expressing Meaning (AT1) and Identity, Diversity and Belonging (AT2). Initially lessons would have to have more of an AT2 focus given the fact the majority of students saw no relevance or meaning in the subject of RE in their experience. Therefore the priority had to be overcoming this misconception.

The initial planning of the project was that it would take place over 6 weeks. The 90 students would divide their time every Wednesday morning between RE, History and Geography. The time we had each week was the equivalent of 4 lessons and we had full flexibility as to how we wished to 'arrange' the students. Each subject area would be tackling the umbrella topic of 'Resolving Conflict' but with subject specific aims and objectives. The majority of planning was to be done in our individual departments but we decided it would be beneficial to have an awareness of what each department was delivering so that cross curricular links could be made within lessons and students would begin to see a 'bigger picture'.

Bearing the results of the student-voice survey in mind, an 8 hour programme was devised (given that each group of 30 students would do RE on a rotation cycle for 2 out of the 6 weeks – the rest of the time would be divided between History and Geography – see below). Lessons would concentrate on personalised, localised and worldwide conflict – incorporating themes of prejudice and discrimination, stereotypes and terrorism (incorporating Islamophobia). The main objective was to cover religious responses and the problems religious people faced as a result of being perceived as 'different' and therefore 'wrong' – thus tackling the 'us and them' mentality. Through this sort of approach it would be possible to show in a meaningful way how belonging to a religious community and feeling a sense of belonging and shared identity can unite people in times of adversity.

To illustrate this we decided to use the example of the plight of Muslims in the wake of Terrorist attacks (primarily 9/11 and the July 7th London Bombings). The idea was to grab the

attention of the students with something they would feel was relevant and, certainly in the case of Terrorism, something they all had some sort of awareness of. It was important to incorporate 'risky, edgy' RE – rather than a sort of 'textbook RE'.

Here are some examples of the sorts of the learning experiences planned in relation to the key question (*To what extent are the problems in today's world caused by a division of "Us and Them"?*):

- Students would be invited to bring in a picture of their choosing that they felt displayed conflict as an initial way of getting them talking – they would have to explain what they could see in the picture and how they felt about it before accepting questions from their peers.
- Students would graduate from this to entering into a 'circle time' discussion / debate, based on the principles of 'Philosophy for Children' (P4C) – this should encourage deeper, more critical thinking and the students generally enjoy the roles that they are given within the circle.
- After receiving a content led session analysing the causes of small and large scale conflict, students were to create their own memorials to the victims of conflict and write an explanation of the symbolism contained in their designs. This would be assessed in relation to the key concept of *expressing meaning* (AT1).
- After receiving a content-led session on Terrorism – again employing techniques of media stimulus, students would work in teams on a mini project of their choosing, selecting from options such as compiling a newspaper report from the viewpoint of a Muslim opposed to such terror attacks, interviewing an innocent Muslim who had been victimised following the event of 9/11 or 7/7, writing a diary account as if they were an observer – all tasks geared in the direction of overcoming the misconception that *all* Muslims were to blame.
- Viewing of '*Polarised*' – a local film made by a youth theatre tackling the issue of racism. Students would then complete a 'hot-seating' activity whereby they would assume the role of one of the characters in the film and be questioned by the rest of the class.
- Students would then consider the negative attitude towards refugees and asylum seekers held by some members of the local community. They would examine case studies of real people who have had to flee their countries, to make the issue 'real' and personal to them. A short film on the subject would be shown before students complete an activity where they put themselves in the position of an asylum seeker who has a only short time to leave their country and has to decide what to take with them.
- Students would then work in teams to produce a guide to resolving conflict in any medium of their choosing (eg: Drama, ICT, Media, Art), with a focus on the key question. This would be assessed in relation to the key concept of *identity, diversity and belonging* (AT2). The students would need a lot of support in making their selections but it would be important to give them the opportunity to become independent learners.

In terms of standards, the initial concern was that of improving levels of interest and therefore of behaviour in RE lessons. In order for the lessons to be meaningful it was important every child felt that they were in a "safe" environment. Once this was established quality of communication was the next priority. In order for students to improve their oral and written communication skills, it was necessary to equip them with the tools of debate – to be able to explain why they believed or thought something was the first step, closely followed by being able to explain why someone else did something or believed something. Some students hadn't ever really considered what they thought or believed – let alone why, and this would be

one of the many challenges of this project. However if these students were to stand any chance of achieving at Key Stage 4 they were skills that were absolutely imperative. As such the level system adopted for the majority of assessment throughout the project was fairly informal and largely based on oral contributions – the overall intention was not to get the students jumping up sub-levels immediately, more to get them thinking, questioning and listening to each other in a way they hadn't before. Once this was established more formal assessment would be possible. The “Can Do” Statements we used can be found on the Better RE website.

Each group of 30 was to be staffed by a subject specialist and we had the use of one teaching assistant across the 90 students. We had access to most facilities in the school – including ‘The Classroom of the Future’, a technology equipped ‘boardroom’ style space which is useful for larger groups of students or for showing media clips. We also had full access to the Learning Resource Centre and also the regional City Learning Centre – a fully equipped ICT suite. In terms of multimedia, we had access to digital cameras, camcorders and digital media software for editing and compiling slideshows. The students quite regularly use this sort of equipment in other lessons and enjoy it so we were keen to build ICT into our project.

The timetable was fixed as follows:

	Group1	Group 2	Group 3
Week 1	RE	History	Geography
Week 2	RE	History	Geography
Week 3	Geography	RE	History
Week 4	Geography	RE	History
Week 5	History	Geography	RE
Week 6	History	Geography	RE

We were all agreed as a Humanities staff that the style of teaching and learning would have to be different in order for us to see a significant impact on the learners. The main change was the flexibility of time. No longer would we have to worry about a lesson being fragmented because the bell had gone and this was really refreshing. We also felt we had the freedom to empower the students with more choice over their style of lessons which in turn would improve their own motivational levels and help them look forward to the lessons – another of the primary aims. In turn, the school empowered us as teachers to try out new things, to take risks – and that above all else the learning experience the student had was the most important thing.

3: How well have we achieved our aims?

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

The differences in the students since adopting this style of learning within RE are evident. Over and above all else their attitude towards RE has changed massively. They now appear to see it as a relevant subject and certainly seemed to enjoy the lessons to the extent that many students wanted to stay in RE to continue their work beyond the allotted time. Students coming into RE had an air of anticipation about them having heard what their peers were doing. Applying the teaching and learning styles of the Skills for Learning programme has clearly benefited the students and we are finding that their overall approach to the RE curriculum has changed for the better. Whilst the level of student misconception at the beginning of the project was alarming it is clear that as the project progressed most students seemed prepared to modify their opinions – at least in the short term. We are hopeful that

over time and with further projects of this nature the students will continue to progress in a positive way.

In terms of meeting the Attainment Targets, we judged that all students made significant progress within AT2 (Identity, Diversity and Belonging). The nature of the tasks delivered and the response of the students demonstrated that students seemed to have a better understanding of their own role within society and that belonging to a religious community was comparable to how they felt they belonged within communities of their own. They also made progress in appreciating diversity and seemed better able to appreciate the circumstances under which people of faith can often receive criticism and blame – some students showed empathy in this circumstance and the objective for future projects would be to move this towards all students showing empathy.

Only a few students (generally those already working at level 3 or 4) were able to express themselves in a written form but the progress made in the oral skills of all students justifiably makes this project a success and therefore worth repeating. AT1 (Expressing Meaning) for this reason was more difficult to assess. Students had a difficulty retaining knowledge from one week to the next so a lot of time was wasted re-capping. Concentration levels were low so lessons had to be fast paced and in easy to digest 'chunks' – as such the content delivered was at a low level. However, once again, progress was made and, with further practice, the students could learn to extend themselves thus allowing them to advance up the levels.

Out of the 8 skills highlighted by Yewlands College as being deficient amongst our students this project focused on the skills of communication, teamwork, problem Solving and self esteem. Students without doubt improved their communication and teamwork skills. Some students still lacked the confidence to attempt any sort of problem solving activities, providing another reason for trying to improve their self esteem. Again, this is something that would improve given time and further planning.

The activities that took place really benefited from the extra time allocated to develop the learning sequence and the freedom to use that time flexibly. This opened up new learning opportunities that ordinarily would not have been possible in single 50 minute lessons. However, many of the tasks completed could be adapted to fit into a 'normal' timetable and could be expected to produce similar results and attitudes amongst the students.

Looking towards the future I feel that the adaptations made to teaching and learning were worthwhile and embraced the benefits of the new secondary curriculum. The cross-curricular links made were meaningful and students seemed to appreciate receiving the same message from all members of staff – this gave the project an air of consistency. The project is being repeated and we are currently delivering a similar project based around the umbrella topic of 'Change'.

In conclusion, I feel my experience has been positive and I am pleased with the progress made by students. I do feel that the project has to be seen as one step towards a bigger overall change of ethos within our school but in terms of small successes I feel the project was a success.