

## Case Study: Spirituality and the Creative Arts

**Highworth Grammar School for Girls: Liz Pope**

### Purpose

We wanted to create an engaging and motivating RE led focus day for Year 9 which also addressed the wider school aims of developing student spirituality, improving KS4 GCSE results and promoting cross-curricular links between subjects.

### Main emphasis

What can different forms of religious expression teach me about human nature?  
Can suspending the timetable, providing a variety of workshops with external visitors and a range of subjects challenge students into reflecting and responding to this key question?

### School profile

Total number of learners	1,189
Age range	11 - 18
Specialist status	Music
Level 5 and above in key stage 3 tests (2007)	98%
Five A*-C at GCSE (2007)	97.63%
Special educational needs	1statemented, 8 School Action Plus, 20 Action Plus

Highworth Grammar School for Girls takes in the top 35% of the ability range and is the local authority approved grammar school for disabled students in this part of Kent. Students come from a wide socio-economic background and the area is mainly white and nominally Christian. The most active religious groups in the area are evangelical Christians, although it is becoming more racially and religiously mixed. Students achieve well at KS3, KS4 and at KS5 when compared to similar schools.

The school expects all students to begin studying for GCSE short course in Religious Studies at the beginning of Year 9 and, unless there are particular circumstances, to 'top up' to a GCSE full course by the end of Year 11. GCSE RS is one of the few subjects to exceed school set targets in its results. It consistently has one of the best Value Added scores and is one of the best performing departments in Kent.

All subject departments have very strong identities and work independently - anything cross-curricular happens on an informal basis. Departments are also very protective of their teaching time and resent losing it for activities perceived as 'unimportant' to their subject. This becomes more pronounced as students progress up the school.

In Kent the locally agreed syllabus is 'ReAct!' written in response to the National Framework in RE. Schools began to implement it in September 2007.

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

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

Students have a positive attitude towards RE and the relationship between students and staff is good but there is a high teacher-dependency rate – many students are happy to let staff lead and to be passive learners. Many are also very exam oriented. In addition, an increasing number of students, who favour kinaesthetic learning styles, only engage when they see the relevance of a subject or topic to their life. RE scores well with these students because of our willingness to adapt lessons to suit their preferred learning styles and by making links to topical issues, films, TV programmes and so on.

Many students are worldly wise but lack self-confidence to try new things and to work with people they don't know very well but if the relationship with the teacher is good and the class atmosphere one of trust and encouragement students will have a go. Students understand and appreciate the diversity of beliefs and values that they encounter during lessons and the impact it can have on someone's life choices and decisions but they are very critical and often find it difficult construct their own coherent set of personal values and a strong personal identity which then shapes their life choices and decision making.

While many students are tolerant of individuals from different races, religions and cultures if they are a friend, ignorance, and other influences lead to stereotyped negative comments about whole groups, e.g. the local Nepalese community, asylum seekers. Literacy, numeracy, ICT and communication skills are excellent. Students also have the ability to use knowledge and make a little information go along way when they feel confident in their abilities.

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

Our priority is to get learners becoming more independent and comfortable undertaking enquiry and problem solving activities, showing initiative and being creative in their response to issues. It would also be good to see learners willing to engage in new things, moving beyond their comfort zone and enjoying learning for the fun of it. We also wanted them to show more awareness of the unfairness of stereotyping and to know how to challenge negative comments about minority groups.

Having an RE focus allows learners to have a breadth of curriculum not catered for within the confines of a GCSE RS syllabus and to develop their AT2 'Learning from and responding to religion' abilities. If we create the right opportunities during the focus day it will encourage students to transfer their skills and make connections between different school subjects, bring wider life into school but also transfer learning to their life beyond school. e.g. critical analysis of texts / newspapers / film in English is applied to movies or TV programmes once out of school. What benefits are there from stillness and meditation for long term mental health?

We planned to maximise the impact the positive relationship the RE department has with students by involving other staff and subjects in an RE led focus day. Also, we hoped to increase learners' awareness, understanding and empathy of how religion is lived by faith communities in Kent by helping them to understand the relevance of spirituality in people's lives, including their own.

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

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

We began by looking at our locally agreed RE syllabus ('ReAct!'). There is a unit called 'Expressions of Spirituality' and KS3 requires a study of Christianity, Buddhism and Sikhism with either Hinduism or Islam. We then looked at the attainment targets appropriate for our Year 9 students. To consolidate and challenge them we concentrated on Levels 6 – 8, in particular the '*expressing meaning*' strand of AT1 and the '*identity, diversity and belonging*' strand of AT2.

We also reviewed student questionnaires and self-assessments (part of the department monitoring process) about their experience of RE. We aimed to build a number of their requests into the focus day: working with friends, being taught in a range of teaching strategies, being given a choice of how they present work, being given choice over what they study, not being patronised by teachers.

A 'brainstorming' session followed and initial ideas were put to a group of students (representing a range of abilities, learning styles and attitudes towards school in general and RE in particular) to give them ownership and personalisation of their learning experiences. In order to increase the relevance of the day, we asked them to produce a 'wish list' of activities.

The outcome of the consultation was an RE led focus day involving the creative arts. We settled on a key question to focus the day's learning activities: '*What can different forms of religious expression teach me about human nature?*'

The new secondary curriculum is encouraging a flexible approach to the use of school time so suspending the Year 9 timetable for a day seemed an easy way to address the overarching aims of the new curriculum – successful learners, confident individuals and responsible citizens – whilst addressing the RE syllabus. Apart from offering personalised learning opportunities it would allow external visitors to participate, promote a quality learning experience and allow choice in what students studied as they could sign up for what most interested them, with opportunities to share and disseminate learning during the afternoon.

This meant accepting that students would not have a consistent depth of knowledge about spirituality in each religion – two areas would be in depth and others would be shallower but as the focus was to be on skills and attitudes, e.g. self-awareness, open-mindedness, respect and empathy, a sense of awe and wonder, creativity, the ability to investigate, reflect, analyse, synthesise, explain and evaluate, more likely to be translated into lifelong learning. It would also be beneficial to have smaller numbers (c. 20 -25 students) in each workshop to benefit student/staff rapport.

It was decided to hold the day at the end of the academic year, after KS3 SATs so staff would feel less pressurised and there would be more flexibility in the availability of facilities and staff.

The Head is keen to encourage curriculum development, especially if it encourages a 'deep learning' experience and the dissemination of good classroom practice around the school. Could the task develop a more flexible curriculum without undermining subject specific learning? Even though subjects would lose lesson time for the focus day, there would be long term gains if students transferred more positive attitudes and improved skills into their

other lessons. This was a good opportunity to see how far subjects could cover their programmes of study and develop the KS3 curriculum aims, overarching themes, learning approaches, and foci for learning through a cross-curricular subject led project and thus inform planning for the re-designing of the KS3 curriculum

Subjects were approached about whether the links we proposed were feasible and given the aims for the day. Would it fit their programmes of study and help develop personal learning and thinking skills? Were they interested in offering workshops? Could we use their specialist rooms/facilities? Although it was to be RE led, could they complete any assessments out of this day too?

Interested subjects created workshops around the aims we had provided. As an AT1 focus all workshops had to enable students to develop a clear picture of how different people express their religious, spiritual and ethical beliefs whilst the AT2 focus was on understanding how individuals develop a sense of identity and belonging through faith or belief:

- Indian dancing (Sikh or Hindu focus) – Dance/PE; feelings and emotions aroused in responding to a religious or spiritual truth or story; the physical affirmation of a spiritual truth; does dance only express positive emotions?
- food Issues (Muslim focus) – Technology; Does food shape the body, the soul or both? Should I care about what I eat (the ethical shopper idea)?
- stained glass windows for the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Christian focus) – Art and Design; design an image that will inspire people to become less materialistic;
- stillness and meditation (Buddhist focus) – RE; the importance of quietness for our mental health and creating self-reflection time;
- black gospel / a capella singing (Christian focus) – Music; expressing feelings and emotions when responding to a life crisis; how music helps forge a community identity; how music empowers a positive response to a life crisis;
- spirituality at the movies – Media; what messages are films giving out on values, purpose and meaning to life? What are they saying about what a person's self-identity should be?
- designing 3D models of places of worship for a new housing estate (various religions) – Technology; can different faith communities inhabit the same building without losing their religious identity?
- movie making or PowerPoint on the numinous – ICT; what gives others and myself (religious or not) goosebumps? what encourages us to think deeply about the purpose to life, who we are and what we value?
- 'Who am I? Why me?' – Spiritual and religious reflections expressed through drama, stories and poetry – English and RE;
- Is laughter good for the soul? (laughter coach). – How can you learn to be 'comfortable in your own skin'? Is a laugh a day good for your health? Can laughing improve learning?

Teachers spoke enthusiastically about the day in assemblies and RE lessons and encouraged students to sign up for their preferred choices (1 = 'most like to do', 5 = 'not really but I'll have a go'). We then created groups based on their choices.

The RE department offered support via resources on spirituality, films, websites, factual information on religious attitudes etc., and explained the RE levels 6 - 8 being aimed at for the assessment to ensure workshops stayed focussed and would enable students to achieve.

External guests delivered the Indian dance, laughter and gospel music workshops. Local contacts found some guests, e.g. a parent is a laughter coach (see [www.laughternetwork.co.uk](http://www.laughternetwork.co.uk)) and we arranged for a member of staff to be present to cover child protection issues. The internet proved a good starting point, e.g. [www.musicforchange.org](http://www.musicforchange.org) based in Canterbury had worked with the Music department on a drumming project and could be approached for further contacts. Testimonials from other schools helped make a decision about who would be best for what we had in mind for the day.

Staff and rooms involved were taken off timetable along with Year 9 for the day. Lessons were covered where necessary by colleagues who had 'lost' their Year 9 classes. Extra budget costs for external visitors, art resources etc were met from the creativity fund (part of our specialist status money).

After an opening session led by the RE department explaining spirituality, students spent the morning attending two workshops. The afternoon would be spent back in teaching groups, sharing and feeding back what had been experienced and learnt. A self-evaluation questionnaire covered attitudes and more general responses, through such questions as, 'What did you personally find the most challenging thing you were asked to do today?' 'What have you learnt about yourself today?' 'Have you learnt something about another person you've worked with today?' 'What can you apply to lessons in school or your life outside school after the focus day?' 'What would you have liked more time to explore and investigate during the day or on another occasion?'

Students were sorted into groups of 4-5 students, each group covering as many different workshops as possible, and set up with the task of responding to the key question '*What can different forms of religious expression teach me about human nature?*' This would extend into the following 2 weeks of RE lessons, allowing IT access for further research and collation of the work into one overall response from the group. Ideally it would be a written response but PowerPoint presentations with scripts would be acceptable. To assist students a writing prompt of questions was provided and the RE ATs (broken down into various 'I can....' statements) were shared and discussed.

e.g. AT1 (*expressing meaning strand*)

- L6 I can use correct religious vocabulary e.g. spiritual, numinous, halal in explaining what the significance of different forms of expression might be for believers e.g. choices of food, gospel music.
- L7 I can use a wide religious vocabulary e.g. aware of different meanings of the word 'spiritual' as well as different of forms of expression e.g. movie maker, dance, art in presenting a coherent understanding of how people express their religious, spiritual and ethical beliefs in a variety of ways.
- L8 I can use a comprehensive religious vocabulary e.g. using different meanings of the word 'spiritual' when weighing up the meaning, importance and impact of different forms of religious, spiritual and moral expression to religious and non-religious people.

e.g. AT2 (identity and belonging strand)

- L6 I can use reasoning and examples e.g. poetry, art, film to express insights into different views about human nature and society and the challenges of belonging to a religion.
- L7 I can give my personal view with reasons and examples on what value religious and other views might have for understanding myself and others' i.e. 'I can relate different people's ideas about human nature to my own character and personality before deciding whether religion can teach us anything about human nature.
- L8 I can weigh up in detail a wide range of viewpoints on questions about who we are and where we belong, and come to my own conclusions based on evidence, arguments, reflections and examples i.e. 'I can write, and justify, my own explanation of what it means to be human, taking into account different ideas, examples and experiences before deciding whether religion can teach us anything about human nature.

Staff involved also had a simple 'tick the boxes' assessment sheet to record their observations of students.

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

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

After a somewhat wary start student engagement, motivation and enthusiasm has been fantastic. Students have astounded us with the depth of their responses in their work and for some of them to get up and perform before their peers is a first. Students' desire for more kinaesthetic learning has raised standards and produced a positive work ethic.

Some have relished the enquiry and investigation aspect in some of the workshops (including the less well-motivated students) although others have sought regular reassurance from the teacher. More opportunities for this style of learning in future will overcome this.

Feedback from the self evaluation forms has often mentioned how they have been pleasantly surprised by some the people they have worked with, e.g. 'she can talk about more than boys!' and taking them outside their comfort zones has helped them to bond as groups and to see the importance of being positive and encouraging each other. They have enjoyed the unusual approach to studying different religions and have made a personal connection between their life/interests and the religion of their workshop. One student reflected that the day 'was interesting, fun, built up confidence, provided meditation techniques to apply to daily life'. This can only help with social cohesion as students have a better understanding of other people's religion and culture. One student wrote, 'I really enjoyed it and it allowed me to experience things that I wouldn't normally'.

The written response to the key question allowed a more reflective student response to the focus day as it was done in the following RE lesson.

Most groups achieved L6 and many several aspects of L7 – obviously we would want a student to achieve this again when working independently to be sure they have this level but another carefully created activity/task would enable this to happen.

The day has proved that subject departments can work together and that this model could be widened out and become a regular feature across KS3. Subjects such as Geography and PSHE, for example, could take the lead on a focus day, choosing the KS3 curriculum aims, overarching cross-curricular dimensions, learning approaches and foci for learning that are appropriate to them, and being supported in their subject content and assessment by the other subjects.

Meanwhile, the RE led focus day could be developed further in future: more links to the community could be developed through external visitors; a showcase of workshop activities could be presented to parents, governors, link primary schools and so on. Extra-curricular activities and 'spin off' lunchtime clubs could look at issues more deeply or address some of the areas **students** would like to explore that they suggested in their self-evaluation forms thus further developing the aims of the RE focus day