

The Sacred world – a planet in crisis - this one!

Tudor Grange School: Simon Bennett

Purpose

- To develop students' knowledge and understanding of the beliefs about the sacredness of the world and the environmental problems the earth is facing;
- To allow students to reflect on their own and others' beliefs and views about the world and the problems it faces;
- To encourage the creativity and imagination of students in expressing their views about the world through music and word.

Main Emphasis

The unit of the work being delivered is based on the year 9 unit of work on *Planet Earth* from the GCSE course. The unit provides the opportunity for students to express their own thoughts and feelings about the planet and its future through words and music. The compelling learning experience is based on the creativity of the work and the relevance of the issue to our very existence. The learning experience is enhanced by the cross curricular links with music, the collaborative group work and the demand for students to use their imaginations and talents.

School profile

Total number of learners	1,250
Age range	11-18
Specialist status	Technology
Level 5 and above in key stage 3 tests 2007	95.5%
Five A*-C at GCSE 2007	97%
Special educational needs	15 (1%)

Tudor Grange School is a mixed comprehensive in south Solihull; it has leading edge status and has recently acquired a sixth form that delivers the International Baccalaureate. The students are from generally well off white middle class backgrounds. Only 5% of the school are from different ethnic minorities. A recent Ofsted found the school to be outstanding in some areas and good in others. The secular nature of the catchment is reflected within the school in that it has no specific links with any local church.

Question 1: What were we trying to achieve?

The new scheme of work that we began this year was based on the AQA GCSE Religious Studies specification B. The department felt that losing some of the imaginative and engaging RE work that was produced for year 9 should be retained. It was an opportunity to produce a

unit of work that was skills driven rather than content driven which the GCSE course can be. The department felt that shifting the emphasis towards skills and concepts would allow for classroom practice to become less didactic and prescriptive but more creative and interactive.

We wanted to produce a sequence of learning that would be experiential and reflective but help students to progress in their thinking about the planet and the environment.

What were our students like at the start?

Students come to the school with above average levels at key stage 2. Many of our students are not from faith backgrounds and this reflected in some weaknesses in their knowledge and understanding of specific religious traditions.

What differences did we want to see in our learners?

Providing a compelling learning experience would help students to develop skills of empathy, imagination and sensitivity in relation to their own beliefs about the world and those of others. In reviewing the local agreed syllabus one of the areas that we felt was lacking in the RE curriculum was the use of the creative arts and we hoped that this unit would address the way in which students could 'recognise the purpose, value and use of the creative arts as a medium of religious expression.'

Another area lacking in our curriculum is the way in which we create a sense of the spiritual and encourage a spiritual response. But we felt that the spiritual expression through music should be made explicit and be integral to the final compositions of students' work.

In terms of *knowledge and* understanding, we wanted students to:

- know about the stories of creation in Christianity and Islam and how they have inspired musical composition;
- understand the way that different traditions have their own stories of creation;
- interpret the different ways that environmental issues are reflected by music;
- express themselves creatively.

In terms of skills, we wanted students to:

- demonstrate empathy, imagination and sensitivity.

In terms of *attitudes and behaviour*, we wanted students to:

- appreciate the sense of wonder at the world in which they live;
- develop their imagination and curiosity;
- be more sensitive to the feelings and ideas of others;
- develop a 'spiritual' response to the problems of the planet.

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

How did we set about making a change?

From previous evaluations of units taught in RE at year 9 we knew that students wanted to engage in practical and experiential work. The unit of work taught to year 10 on the sacred world and the environment was quite dry and content driven. This was an opportunity to create a lively and interactive unit of work using the imagination and creativity of students through music and in a way not often utilised in RE.

The context from the outset was that the unit of work would benefit development of students' skills in both RE and music and in order to help motivate them, we agreed a key question that would provide a relevant investigation for both subjects. Our question was, "*Planet in Crisis*": *What are your beliefs about the environmental problems and how can they be expressed by your own musical composition?*'

We also wanted the unit of work to provide evidence of student progression in both disciplines, and in RE we decided to focus the assessment on the key concepts areas of '*expressing meaning*' and '*values and commitments*', aiming to achieve a balance across attainment targets 1 and 2.

The planning of the curriculum time was important as access to the music room and facilities were key to the success of the project. We were fortunate that we had recently required a 'lead lesson learning area' that was ideal for engaging students in a musical and visual way from the very first lesson. This also ensured that students had access to the widest range of materials for producing their own musical responses.

We made sure that we had full use of ICT facilities through the school's booking system for rooms and laptops. The internet was made available for research into the different types of music being used and also the Christian and Muslim beliefs about the planet and its future.

The curriculum time devoted to the unit of work was increased which was enabled by the changes in the curriculum time given to year 9 by the earlier start of the GCSE.

The RE and Music Lessons

After the lead lesson students worked in collaborative groups. This allowed for team work and interactive study. Students were given tasks to explore and produce a piece of music that expressed their own views and ideas about the planet and creation in response to the exploration of the beliefs of Christians and Muslims. The actual process was going to be the key to the assessment from both the RE and music perspective. The actual finished work in terms of showing musical talent would be secondary to the journey the students had undertaken to get there.

A lot of responsibility was given to the students in the management of their time but they responded well to this as they had gained experience of working through independent self supported studies in years 7 and 8.

From the outset the work was to be concept lead and students were to explore the beliefs about a creative God who many believe to be sustaining the world in which we live, the spiritual *expressions* of awe and wonder and the *moral question* of how we should, as individuals, respond to the problems facing the planet.

One of the aims of the work was to allow students to reflect and explore the music from different cultural backgrounds from Balinese Gamelan to Blues. In small groups, students were to consider which form was appropriate to expressing their own ideas and views of the world. We planned to give students autonomy in the form of music they chose but in considering the time issue they were going to make better progress if the musical expression was based on some prior learning from years 7 and 8 in music.

Part of the exploration for students was to explore environmentally produced music, i.e. natural music created from renewable resources and household objects.

Assessment of students' work would be done through observations of their application to the tasks and of their reports on their findings as well as on their final musical piece. Due to the nature of the tasks and the fact that the work was a trial it was decided that students would complete a self assessment and award themselves an 'attitude to learning' grade. When the students are finally assessed using the GCSE question on planet earth we will be able to compare their results with other classes who worked through the unit using the previous methods of teaching.

We identified the following cross-curricular links as being relevant to the project:
Spiritual Development: how beliefs and concepts in religion may be expressed through the creative and expressive arts.

- Cultural development: students experienced the creative and expressive arts and resources from differing cultures;
- Citizenship: exploring the duties of citizens locally, nationally and globally.

Question 3: How well have you achieved your aims?

What differences are evident? What impact have you made on your learners?

The students showed real enthusiasm towards the lessons and felt that they had achieved something practical. Some of the students who were gifted musically appreciated the opportunity to use their skills in the religious studies lessons. However, the musical outcomes from the unit of work were secondary to the process of discussion and creative thinking around the key questions.

It was clear from the observations of the group work that students were drawn into the questions raised by the responses of both Christians and Muslims to the world. Many of the concepts such as sacredness, love, greed, and exploitation were reflected in the song lyrics they devised. There is always a risk when students are given the freedom to express themselves with music or drama that some will be more on task than others. The teacher needs to be conscious of this and support those who may otherwise be left behind.

Following on from this there is the question of how best to assess students after such an open way of learning. Both the music teacher and myself felt a formal assessment based on the outcomes of the musical piece was not appropriate. Instead, we encouraged the students to use a self assessment method to evaluate the learning that they had experienced.

The difference between how the module used to be taught and how this was done was vast. Students reflecting on the differences were very much in favour of this joint work with departments and requested that this should be repeated in other units of work in RE.

The Impact on the Learners

From the evaluations and assessments we noted five key ways in which the module had had an impact:

1. The learning engaged students because it was different and practical.
2. They enjoyed the chance to develop and use their musical skills to express themselves in a contemporary way.
3. The students felt engaged in an ethical issue that is relevant and important to their own lives and that of future generations.
4. They were given the opportunity to reflect on their own beliefs and those of others in relation to the world around them and create something tangible from their discussions and insights.

The students appreciated that they were being given an opportunity to listen and learn from their peers who were expressing their beliefs in a very personal way.