

Religious Education Case Study

The following case study focuses on the teaching of Buddhism at Key Stage 3 using activities that promote Thinking Skills and personal capabilities. The case study outlines the activities that pupils were involved in and a reflection on how the activities progressed with issues raised in following the techniques used.

BACKGROUND

The school in question is an Integrated, co-educational, all ability school, situated in Belfast. It currently has an enrolment of 800, with a Year 8 intake of approximately 130. Within the Religious Education department there are two full time teachers.

WHY BUDDHISM?

When World Faiths was included in the RE Core Syllabus at Key Stage 3, the department decided that Judaism would be taught in Year 8, Islam in Year 9 and Buddhism in Year 10. Buddhism was chosen as many pupils had an interest in eastern religions. They had some knowledge of the words that would be associated with them, for example karma, meditation, Buddha. However they had little or no understanding of what they were and what they meant within the concepts of a faith.

THE PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT OF UNIT

The over all learning intentions were of the unit were:

- to develop an understanding of the life of Siddhartha and how he became enlightened;
- to explore the teachings of Buddhism and how they can lead to enlightenment;
- To become aware that Buddha images are different and contain teachings;
- To have an understanding of the importance of Shrine worship.

TEACHING THE UNIT OF WORK

The unit was divided into six sections and taught for six to eight weeks. The sections examined topics such as:

- What make's people happy?
- Where did Buddhism come from?
- What are the teachings of Buddhism?
- The images of Buddha and Shrine worship.

The department wanted to incorporate Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities into the unit and chose the following skills as a focus.

Managing Information:

- use a range of methods for collating, recording and representing information.

Thinking, Problem-Solving and Decision-Making:

- sequence, order, classify, and make comparisons.

Outline of Activity 1

Story Telling (Story of Prince Siddhartha – The Buddha)

‘Story telling is an oral activity that enables pupils at all levels of ability in reading to participate. It promotes listening skills and builds confidence in speaking as well as developing thinking skills. Pupils work and rework the story in their minds as they carry out the activity and this helps them to retain the information as they develop a better understanding of how the story can be interpreted. The fact that this activity, like many other thinking skills strategies, has an element of fun and competition helps to motivate pupils. RE is rich in stories and there are some good collections available for use in the classroom. This Strategy is one more way of using this heritage to promote religious understanding.’ (Thinking Through Religious Education. Vivienne Baumfield 2002)

Using a story telling strategy (Thinking Through Religious Education Vivienne Baumfield 2002) the pupils were told a short version of the life of Prince Siddhartha).

Pupils were placed in groups of 4 and were asked to number themselves 1-4. Pupils numbered 1 were asked to join the teacher in a small enclosed space outside the classroom and were told the story of Prince Siddhartha. At this time pupils numbered 2-4 were completing a reading and writing task related to the subject. When the teacher completed telling the story she returned to the classroom and pupils numbered 2 left. They were told the story by the number 1 from their group.

All pupils returned to the class room. Number 4 were asked to leave and wait outside while number 2 told the story to number 3 without the help of number 1. Pupils numbered 4 then returned to the class room and were told the story by pupils numbered 3. Number 4 then had to retell the story to number 1.

At the end of the story telling the groups discussed how the story had been passed on and noted any changes that had occurred. They were also encouraged to discuss the strategies they had used to remember the story and what had worked the best. The groups were then set a task of answering a set of questions using the information they had gained from hearing the story.

ISSUES TO BE ADDRESSED BEFORE ACTIVITY COMMENCED

1. Pupils left without supervision both inside and outside the classroom.

The activity was explained to the pupils and that some of them would be unsupervised for a short while. The teacher discussed with the class the importance of maturity when completing the task and to be aware of other classes being taught. The class were told that this was going to be an interesting and different lesson and if the teachers trust was broken they would not complete a similar task again.

2. Discipline.

Full co-operation was needed from all pupils in order for the thinking skill to be successfully completed. An element of competition was introduced to try to encourage all group members to remain on task. The group who had the most correct questions at the end of the story telling session would receive a prize.

3. Groupings.

At the beginning of each half term the teacher changed the seating plan in her classroom. She placed together pupils who were not friends and wouldn't distract each other. Her tables were arranged in groups of four. These were the groups that the teacher used to complete the activity.

Running the Activity

The class arrived and the teacher explained the task and talked to the pupils about their responsibilities during the lesson. The pupils were keen and enthusiastic from the start as this was something new to them and gave them more responsibility for their learning. The groups decided in what order they would hear the story and the first pupils left the classroom with the teacher. When the teacher returned to the room most of the pupils had remained on task and completed the activity left for them. As the task continued one group took longer to retell the story. This slowed down the process and the task lost some of its momentum. However they were soon back on task as the pupils were then asked ten questions based on the story. They discussed these in their groups and decided collectively on an answer and wrote it down on a piece of file paper. The groups swapped their file pages, the teacher gave the correct answers and each group marked the file sheet they had been given. The group with the most correct answers collected their prize.

REFLECTION

It was apparent that a time limit was needed to establish how long each group would have to hear the story. The pupils would then know that they had a limited time and wouldn't continually go over parts of the story without hearing all of it first. This would keep the groups moving along together.

More time was needed for the pupils to reflect on the strategies that they had used to remember the story and discuss what works best and why. This was an important part of the lesson and focuses on the thinking skill.

Dividing the class into groups was also problematic. As the pupils already sat in groups the teacher decided to use these to complete the task. However some of the pupils didn't like talking to certain members of their group. Therefore they told the story as quickly as possible so that they didn't have to be in the company of the other person for longer than necessary. This meant that they missed out important parts of the story and the pupil that they were talking to didn't have time to assimilate the information. For this particular task the teacher needed to be aware of which pupils worked well together and group them accordingly.

At the end of this lesson the teacher asked the pupils what skills they had developed. The number, range and originality of their answers was surprising and gratifying and included, communication, managing information, recall, working in groups, listening and memory.

Outline of Activity 2

FORTUNE LINES/LIVING GRAPHS

Fortune Lines chart the changes in a person's fortune over time. They can be real or fictional characters. The Fortune Line allows the pupils to make the connection between the belief and teaching of a religion and the possible experiences and emotions of the founders and followers. Using Fortune Lines should raise awareness of what it means to experience certain events. Pupils have to justify choices made and think about how someone might reasonably feel in a particular situation. The strategy is designed to encourage pupils to consider two aspects of the information at the same time – the temporal sequence of the events, and the emotions of the central character. Pupils practice and develop a range of important skills including: interpreting information, sequencing, making links, checking and refining, explaining and justifying. (Thinking Through Religious Education. Vivienne Baumfield 2002)

Pupils had never used Fortune Lines before so the task was explained using the life of David Beckham as an example to the whole class.

Pupils were asked to:

- think of five events in the life of David Beckham;
- place these in chronological order at the bottom of the graph on the board;
- on vertical line place a range of emotions from very bad to very good;
- place a mark on graph to explain how David Beckham may have felt during the five events chosen.

Once this was completed pupils were asked to justify their positions on the graph.

The pupils then went on to complete a Fortune Line on the life Siddhartha in groups. They were given twelve cards that contained information about Siddhartha life and an A3 sheet of paper. They had to put these into chronological order on the graph and discuss how he felt at this time. Through negotiation pupils decide where to place a mark on the graph to explain how Siddhartha may have felt during each event.

ISSUES TO BE ADDRESSED

1. Keeping pupils on task and ensuring everyone is participating and no one is dominating the group.

The teacher had to constantly circulate around the room and enter into discussions with the pupils asking them to discuss their reasoning. If a pupil seemed to be holding on to all the cards the class was brought back together and a group that was working well were asked to explain their strategies. Therefore no one was being criticised directly.

2. Groups

The pupils were put into groups along friendship and mixed ability lines.

3. Timing.

The pupils were given a certain amount of time to complete the first part of the task, sequencing the cards. The class was brought back together and the order was discussed. They were then given another amount of time to think about how Siddhartha felt at each stage of his life.

REFLECTION

It was noticed that during the activity the girls were more engaged than the boys. The boys allowed the girls to make the decisions. It could be that the activity did not interest boys as much as girls and they chose not to participate as fully. They may have believed that girls were better at understanding emotions.

Some of the groups didn't take time to think through the whole range of emotions that Siddhartha may have felt. They decided he was happy, sad or in between. This meant that they completed the task extremely quickly with little thought behind their choices. The teacher spent some time with these groups trying to tease out some other emotions that Siddhartha may have had.

For this type of task it may be better to have single sex groups and add an element of competition. For example, which group could give the best explanations and justify their fortune line. The statements were deliberately chosen to make the pupils think about a range of emotions that Siddhartha was feeling. The teacher should have discussed with the whole class one of the statements to demonstrate the range of emotions Siddhartha could have had before the groups began that element of the task.

EVALUATION

When using these strategies in a lesson for the first time, teachers will be operating outside their own comfort zones. They must be willing to have a less than perfect lesson to begin with and feel more comfortable. It is important not to give up if things go wrong. Reflect upon the lesson and think through what would have made it better. It is always good to be able to try out a lesson on different classes so that new techniques can be used each time. Think carefully about the groups that the pupils divided into. If pupils don't get on, the whole task could be affected. Many of these strategies will not be successful until the dynamics of the classes are known and the teacher has an understanding of their personalities. For this reason it is unlikely that this sort of teaching would work as effectively in the early part of an academic year.

Thinking skills require a lot of planning and it is better to start on a small scale. Begin with Year 8 and train them in the techniques. Teachers should always explain to the class what is expected of them and the nature of the thinking skill that they are hoping to develop within the pupils. It is always good to use the plenary session to discuss the skills that have been developed and the process that was used. It can be surprising how the classes react to these tasks. Some of the more 'lively' classes enjoy the challenge and produce excellent work compared to that of a more 'settled' class.