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Spirituality in the Classroom: Interactivity and Imagination

Georgia Prescott challenged herself to make her RE work more spiritually focused. Her article may make you wish you could take the module she has devised – but could you run something similar in your classroom?

I like to offer a module in Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural Development (SMSCD) as part of primary initial teacher training. I feel it is an essential part of any child's development, and it is an area that is otherwise only covered briefly in any other area of their degree.

When I was lucky enough to be granted a place on one of the 2011 Westhill Trust Seminars at the Met Hotel in Leeds on 25th-27th November 2011 entitled '*Spirituality and RE: Imagination, Spiritual Development and the RE Curriculum*', I wondered if it was time to challenge myself a little further. Having attended two previous seminars (in Glasgow 2009 and Norwich 2006) I realise the important opportunity these events give all the participants for professional nourishment and growth. They refresh and inspire you with renewed enthusiasm and new ideas and are a great opportunity to meet other RE professionals from a range of educational settings. But because the seminars also encourage you to develop yourself personally and academically, I thought I should play a more active part in this one and volunteered to do a presentation sharing some work I had been doing with my trainee teachers at the University of Cumbria (UOC). Stephen Pett was glad to accept my offer. The Westhill Challenge was on!

The Context

The work I had been doing was with students in their second year of a three year primary QTS degree at both the Lancaster and Carlisle campuses of the University of Cumbria. Students are offered a choice of one of four modules to supplement their core studies which gives them the chance to follow an

area that particularly interests them. I gathered a module group to think about SMSCD.

The Learning Experience

During the module we took each area of SMSCD in turn and through an experiential approach came to understand what each includes and how we might provide for them in the classroom. It seems to me that the important thing with SMSCD is to recognise that we already do provide for it, so some of the learning comes from raising consciousness about *how* we do that and what each area involves. This would include recognising how complex each one is.

I challenged the students to consider what sort of teacher they want to be; what ethos they want to create in their classroom and what they think is important in education using Pink Floyd's *Another Brick in the Wall* video. I involved them in reflective activities, philosophical enquiry and creative work using the NATRE Spirited Arts web gallery (www.natre.org.uk) as a stimulus. One week we went to the local park and created natural sculptures using Andy Goldsworthy's work as a stimulus. As students had come to this module from a range of different groups, it was a good opportunity for social as well as spiritual development.

My aim in the module was that they experience a range of activities that can provide for SMSCD and recognise the opportunities they provide. I suggest that they cannot encourage children's development in these areas if they do not open themselves up to it as teachers themselves.

The Theory

As part of the module we also explored some key theories on SMSC development, including Burns and Lamont's definition of community in the classroom; the Ofsted definitions of SMSC and Tony Eade's (2008) book, as well as the work of Elton-Chalcraft (2002), Hay and Nye (2006) and Adams, Hyde and Woolley (2008).

For spiritual development, which can be one of the most difficult to grasp, partly due to confusion over its relationship to religion and the religious, we explored how people have tried to break this down into different 'dimensions' or aspects. I think these dimensions are useful for teachers to take a stock-check of how well they are providing for children's spiritual development in their school.

These dimensions, as defined by Elton-Chalcraft, Hay and Nye and Ruth White of the Wessex Synod, I have linked as follows:

- **The Inner Dimension** – *Looking Inwards* to your self – your feelings / experiences / what is important to you.
- **The Social / Moral Dimension** – *Looking Outwards* to others – the way you interact with others and our important relationships.
- **The Environmental Dimension** – *Looking Downwards* to the Earth.
- **The Transcendental** – *Looking Upwards* towards God / the divine / a sense of the 'other'.

I feel that these dimensions can help to quell the worry and nervousness that some people have about spirituality, and open it up in its fullest sense, without excluding those who feel they do not have a faith as such.

The Task: for now and the future

In the Education Faculty at UOC, we have been encouraged to think of different ways to assess our students and to make assessment real, meaningful and worthwhile. I wanted to engage them in a task that would be of use in the long-term and hopefully impact upon their practice in school the following term.

As part of their assessment, students were asked to create an interactive display or 'space' in small groups that they would present to us and take into a school to try it out with children. They would then submit a PowerPoint presentation justifying and evaluating their display, including how it was

received in school. With my former colleague Chris Thompson we first asked students to produce these displays as part of this module some years ago, with stunning and, I hope long-lasting effects, so I am convinced of their value.

As a stimulus for the displays we looked at the displays in *'Pause for Reflection. A Resource for Spiritual Development in Schools by Education Advisors for Dioceses in SW England'* published by the Stapleford Centre in 2004. These are all interactive displays designed to encourage spiritual development. They are simple in their design, but profound in their content. We also looked at the article by Jacqui Metcalf in the Summer 2011 edition of RE Today: *Creativity and Spirituality: growth through RE* about creating sacred spaces in school.

The Results

The displays produced were of a high standard and were generally well-received in school. One or two of them are shown here. Others are available *****. I had told the students I would be presenting them at the Westhill Trust seminar, which was a good incentive for them too, and a good boost when they were told how much people had enjoyed and admired them there.

The Legacy

In their written piece of assessment students reflected on the value of studying SMSC in greater depth and of creating the displays. For some, it had a profound impact. In the immediate term I encouraged the students to create their own displays on block placement in school in the Spring Term.

In the longer term I hope that those students involved in creating the displays will continue to create them when qualified teachers in their own classrooms. Occasionally I have seen former students who reflect on the module and say they have done just this. Our Ambleside campus is a gift location for work like this: some students made really creative use of the grounds and the chapel to create beautiful spaces for reflection.

The Challenge Renewed?

From reading this, are you inspired to create a space for reflection or a display in your school? They do not need to take long to create, it is the thought that goes into their planning that takes the time.

- Do you have a small space in school, school grounds or in your classroom where you could create a display that provides opportunities for SMSC?
- Which dimension of spirituality do you want to focus on?
- Can you think of a suitable metaphor to create the display around?
- How would children interact with the display?

Georgia Prescott MA is Senior Lecturer in Primary Religious Education at the University of Cumbria.

Her work described here can be seen more fully on the RE Today website: get your downloads, using the password on the inside back cover each term.