

Preface to the Theatre of Learning

The purpose of this book is to take you on a journey with me and my pupils. It is a journey away from a content-led syllabus taught through reading from text books and writing on worksheets, into a world of experiential and enactive learning, where we share powerful and meaningful experiences together, which develop both students' and teachers' spirituality.

It has moulded group after group into a caring, sensitive community full of trust and respect for each other. It has enabled pupils to empathise with and understand religious activities and viewpoints quite different from their own and enabled them to express the highest levels of the new national framework in RE.

In these classes, reading from a book and tackling tasks that are in essence comprehension exercises of that text is never the starting point. Writing, coming after these experiences, begins with the pupils expressing their own spiritual, moral, social and cultural development before going on to describe that of the tradition they are studying. The first enables them to understand the latter. For the many for whom literacy is a challenge, these tasks are tackled from the memory and understanding of rich, meaningful multi-sensory lessons where they took part on an equal basis with the most able and where their oral contributions have been valued and respected by everyone. See the sample lesson on Christian Prayer for an example.

The students and I welcome visitors. We have many. They are proud to show off the way we work and to talk about how they feel about the way we learn. The best way for you to take these teaching methods on board would be to come and spend a day with us.

For those of you who can't do this, this book will take you on the journey of discovery with us. You will be able to share the process by which this rich, meaningful, healing and wholesome way of learning has developed. Its purpose is to stimulate your imagination, raise your awareness of what you already know about yourself, your pupils and how they learn and give you permission to make the small but seemingly daring changes that will make huge differences to the way you and your pupils interact. I know it works. I know it works in other schools because my teacher trainees and the teachers who have been on my courses tell me so.

The Journey Begins

It was in the summer of 1996 that I came into my classroom one morning to find a little pink parcel on my desk with a card which said:

"This is a small gift to thank you for all that you have done to make this somewhat tedious course bearable, love, Natalie."

Natalie has intended throughout most of the GCSE course to take RE for A Level. She was deeply interested in philosophy and ultimate questions, as the brilliant drama production she subsequently wrote and directed in the sixth



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form showed. There you have it, the reason why she chose drama instead: it was drama that provided the vehicle for her to explore ultimate questions and to express both her own and others' spirituality. RE was simply "tedious".

The gift took me by surprise: it was a photograph of her GCSE class, one of the most difficult I have ever taught. We battled together for two years with hostility and disaffection on both sides, dodging the paper aeroplanes and trumpets they made out of their worksheets. Only 10 of the 22 pupils actually sat the examination that summer. The special needs pupils had been withdrawn long before because of the demanding literacy skills needed to attempt the work. Others had simply 'died' of boredom. After the dreadful mock results in January I had sat them in a circle, as we had often done in lower school when RE was fun. They were angry.

"You've let us down, you told us this course was about people: it's not, it's boring."

"It's not going to help us get a job, it has nothing to do with anyone or anything that we know."

"What's all these church buildings and prayer got to do with life or jobs? None of it makes any sense."

"It has nothing to do with us."

"It's a waste of time. My Mum says I should concentrate on my other subjects. I'm not going to bother to revise."

"This subject is a waste of time."


And they were right. It was the most painful moment of my 20-year career. I knew they were right and I did not know what to do about it.

Five years down the road, RE has changed beyond all recognition. Our two classrooms on our large, split-site school have been transformed into what we call our Theatres of Learning. Gone are the traditional desks and tables. Instead, the pupils work permanently in circles around huge multi-sensory displays, which often cover the entire floor space. Religious artefacts are set among water, driftwood, seaweed and sand. There may be special lighting, steam, fabric, musical instruments and there is always music: music from every time period, genre and culture, chosen to fulfil a carefully planned purpose, which may be to create excitement, atmosphere, pathos or to calm and still the class, preparing them for the special and unique experiences that they will share together that lesson.

The displays are set within constantly changing sets: a synagogue that becomes Orthodox or Reform during the course of a lesson. Churches in all their denominations, a Gurdwara or Hindu temple. Pupils re-enact the powerful Easter service in the Orthodox church, filling the darkened classroom with light, passing candles to one another in a room filled with the sound of the liturgy as the priest passes through the iconostasis that we have built in front of a velvet draped altar. The atmosphere is awesome, the experiences they share are powerful. Visit the Photographic Tour of the Theatre of Learning chapter to get an impression.

The preparation that takes place before the re-enactments is deeply personal, developing pupils' own spirituality, and a deep respect and acceptance of each other.



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"I have said things in these classes that I would say to no one else," said Fran, a 16-year-old who had just completed the first fully experiential RE GCSE at our school, to an international audience where we presented our work at the First International Conference on Children's Spirituality at University College, Chichester.

Our work is attracting considerable attention now. The students welcome and expect visitors: they are as passionate about what we do as I am. It is through listening to what they tell our visitors that I have come to find out just how powerfully they are affected by and value what we do. Listen to these year 9 boys talking on various occasions to an inspector, a visiting Head of RE and a research fellow, and please note, they are boys, not usually noted for an enthusiastic response to RE.

"RE is so exciting, you wait outside, you hear the music and you wonder what is going to happen this week."

"RE is the highlight of our week."

"I love RE, it really makes you think."

"I'll never forget our first lesson, do you remember? We came into this music with the sound of waves and there was a massive island built in the room with wind chimes, water and shells. We all thought RE was rubbish, where you copied things and mucked about. We were silenced. I think we were just stunned. We had never seen anything like it."

The pupils were interviewed for Australian radio at the conference on children's spirituality. They were on their own. I didn't hear what they said until after the broadcast. What they said was the complete antithesis of the group four years ago. They spoke of the effect RE has on their relationships with each other, of their ability to understand the world outside and what they see about other traditions on the television. They spoke of the way it has deepened their understanding of themselves, how they come out of a lesson having realised things about themselves and the people who are important to them that they wouldn't otherwise have done, because of the reflective exercises we have undertaken together.

They spoke of how different RE is to any other lesson because they listen to and respect each other, share their inner worlds with each other and expect and get confidentiality within the lesson, knowing that what they say will not be repeated outside the classroom.

"It lets you understand people more, you understand why people are the way they are. You don't just shout across the room as you might in another lesson. It's not about popularity, either. The boundaries fall down because you are talking about feelings. It's about something you feel so you remember it and it's something you enjoy as well," said 17 year old Jo. She is studying RE at A Level and was a member of the first class to gradually change from traditional methods to experiential work over the course of her two years' studying GCSE.

"RE classes are much closer together than other classes, because you have all experienced something together. Even if you are not friends with the people in the class, you get to know them and about how they feel," said Joe, who has just completed GCSE and is one of three boys making up the class of ten beginning A Level in September 2003.

Marion De Souza, Lecturer in Religious Studies from the Catholic University in Ballarat, Australia, spoke with Wendy Barnaby, of the Australian Broadcasting company, during a programme about the significance of what she had seen the students demonstrate and talk about in the workshop.

"When you begin to build a sense of community in the RE classroom you really are developing a sense of trust, developing a relationship between themselves secure enough to allow them to voice their opinions and to share things that are close to them and through this experience you are developing their own spirituality. By building trust and community it engenders a reaching out between the students, nurtures spirituality. It also has an emotional aspect because it gives them a sense of value and identity within the class because of the trust that's been built. It gives them a sense of who they are, enabling them to reach inside themselves and then out to others. They are not afraid to express themselves and so it's of real value to their emotional development."

Their engagement with the work is total. All pupils whatever their ability learn on an equal basis: behaviour management is irrelevant. The trust and affection that ten classes have built with each other is a testimony to the ability of these methods to develop the whole student in ways that are so much more fundamental and valuable than simply passing an exam alone.

Working in this way has:

- ♦ Improved relationships between members of the class
- ♦ Improved teacher/pupil relationships
- ♦ Helped behaviour management
- ♦ Helped pupils really engage with the work
- ♦ Increased understanding and memory
- ♦ Increased exam recruitment
- ♦ Involved parents
- ♦ Improved exam results
- ♦ Raised the profile of RE throughout the whole school

The Purpose of this Book

In the chapters that follow you will find a step by step unpacking of each of the aspects of developing experiential and enactive learning in RE. This will enable you to create the building blocks that put together powerful and meaningful learning experiences.

In these chapters we will look at:

- ♦ What happens as you plan a lesson to develop a difficult abstract concept using the five senses and without literacy
- ♦ How you can plan lessons to develop trust and respect in the group, which is essential to allow real learning to take place
- ♦ How you can prepare a class to tackle sensitive issues and how you can take care of them and yourself during and after it



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- ♦ The pattern involved in helping you plan religion-neutral exercises that parallel the aspect of a particular religious tradition that you are going on to teach

Further resource files will comprise collections of 'lesson recipes' on various themes and religious traditions, showing you how to create and draw upon the experiences in your own classroom. Armed with understanding from the theory, you will be able to go away and create your own Theatre of Learning.

Using these as a springboard for your own imagination, you will find yourself devising your own religion-neutral exercises, concept building activities and re-enactments that make religion make sense for you and your pupils, and most importantly, enable both them and you discover and develop your own spirituality.

I hope that as you read you will catch the excitement that we feel. I hope that you will find, as we did, a huge awareness of RE making sense for you as well as for your pupils.

Experiential RE works because:

- ♦ Everyone in the class can contribute to and learn from the experiences on an equal basis, whatever their ability to read and write
- ♦ Everyone in the class feels valued and respected by everyone else in the class so people don't need to show off, be defensive, hostile or misbehave
- ♦ Every topic studied is preceded by an activity that raises pupils' awareness of their own feelings and needs and how they are similar to those of the people they are going to study
- ♦ Everything the pupils do makes sense and is meaningful, so they are always absorbed and engaged
- ♦ Able pupils are challenged by experiential and enactive learning and so produce work of greater depth and quality than they would otherwise have done

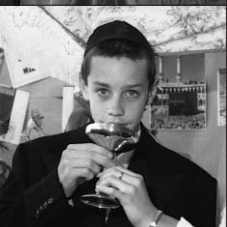
Ann, a Head of RE, attended one of our day courses. She said at the beginning:

"I am very keen to promote RE as an academic subject and I am concerned that experiential or enactive techniques will detract from that."

At the end of the day I asked her whether she felt the same:

"It's obvious now, they understand so much more, so of course their written work will be better."

- ♦ Reluctant writers are much more keen to write about what they have felt and experienced themselves before linking it with the explicit activity from the tradition they are studying.
- ♦ Less able pupils, having been able to access the learning, have higher self esteem, memory and understanding and so progress further with their written work. Where pupils qualify for readers and scribes in the exam they have obtained D and C grades at GCSE.



What this Book will Enable You to Do

It has taken me many years to develop these strategies by trial and error. You won't be able to transform your classes overnight, but if these methods appeal to you, the book will provide you with all you need to go as far as you wish.

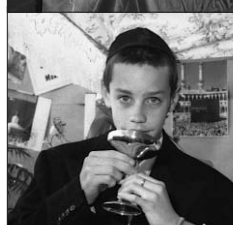
By the end of this book:

- ♦ You will be equipped to begin working in circles and know how to build trust and enable pupils to listen sensitively and respectfully to each other.
- ♦ You will have lots of ideas for how to put experiential (feelings) work into lessons and how to use synaesthetic (5 senses) and enactive work to improve memory and understanding.
- ♦ It will show you how to make links between the concept you want the student to learn and the student's own experience.
- ♦ Once you have the idea it can be applied to any topic and in any subject area. The only limitation is planning time: it's much quicker to say "copy this down and learn it by heart."

To make it work in your school you need to bear these things in mind:

- ♦ Be realistic - there is no "have to" about any of this. Use your feelings as a guide as to how far you want to go.
- ♦ Start with one nice group: involve the pupils in the change and negotiate, eg "How do you feel about putting the chairs in a circle today? What do you think we need to agree as a group so that our circle feels safe?"
- ♦ Be individual. Don't try and copy what we do slavishly. It is what our lesson recipes inspire you to create for your own situation that matters. There is no right way to do this.
- ♦ Use your imagination. It's actually much easier for student teachers to take these ideas on board than those of us who have been teaching for years. Be asking yourself all the time, "How can I ensure that this topic that I have to teach makes sense?" Give yourself permission to experiment, to play, to have fun. You will soon know from the students' reactions whether it is working or not. Use your imagination to see the classroom as a special place in which we can experience, feel, share and learn, so what do you need for that?
- ♦ Be empathic. Empathise with the pupils as you prepare a topic: How might the subject appear to them? Empathise with the believers: What is important about the topic to believers? Can you use that to make a common link to start from?

Our breakthrough came when we began to use feelings to prepare our work. We wondered how we could convey the specialness of the Torah to individual Jews in a class of fourteen year olds just beginning GCSE. We invited the pupils to bring in their most precious object to talk about in class. A powerful link emerged which enabled pupils to empathise with the importance of the Torah to Jews, with words becoming almost unnecessary.



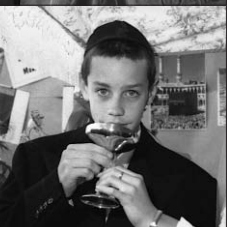
Overall as you read this book, hang on to this thought:

SMALL CHANGES CAN MAKE BIG DIFFERENCES

Consider:

- ♦ Using circle work sometimes
- ♦ Having a visual centrepiece, flowers, cloth, artefacts

and our involvement with this book, yours and mine will have been worthwhile.



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