

the theatre of learning

... MULTI-SENSORY TEACHING

Imagine yourself entering a darkened classroom full of candlelight and the sound of the Orthodox liturgy. You take your place with a group of pupils about to re-enact the Easter midnight service. The chairs are in a horseshoe around a set representing an *iconostasis*. The icons on the royal gates are gleaming in the candlelight. The sound of the choir fills the room. The pupils take their places quietly, calmed and engaged by the powerful atmosphere.

They have prepared for this lesson for some time. As the teacher asks them about the building and artefacts represented, it is clear that they understand the symbolism of the church they are sitting in and the meaning of the re-enactment in which they are about to take part. This intellectual knowledge which, traditionally taught, so often fails to enthuse, is about to become an experience which will engage the whole child.

The music is gently faded and a visualisation about a worshipper praying before an icon uses the imagination to set the scene and reinforces subject knowledge while engaging the emotions.

A tray of tealights is set out on a tiny altar near the royal gates. Each pupil is invited to light a candle for someone or something they have lost, engaging their own spirituality. Pupils experience a sense of ritual as they come up one by one and return to their seat to reflect.

As the re-enactment begins, the candles are blown out and the pupils reflect on the death of Jesus. Three

pupils go behind the screen to take on the role of priests and each pupil is given an unlit candle as they stand to take their places around the *iconostasis*. The Liturgy fills the room once more. The gates open and a pupil carries a single candle into the classroom from which each pupil lights their own, gradually filling the classroom with light. Two others take a mixture of bread and wine to each pupil, which is given from a long-handled spoon. The music fades and the pupils sit quietly holding their candles, reflecting on the symbol of hope in the face of loss while the teacher reinforces the meaning of the experience they have had.

The writing that emerges from lessons like this is rich and detailed, full of evaluation and empathy with the believers whose experience they are wishing to understand, as well as showing evidence that it raises awareness of and develops the pupils' own spirituality.

Some years ago, faced with a group of Year 11 pupils who were so bored that more than half of them refused to take the GCSE exam, I was determined to find a better way to educate than fact-cramming for a course which the pupils said 'has nothing to do with us or anything we know'. The result was the Theatre of Learning.

It is a process, not a place. It uses circle work, trust-building and communication skills, and multi-sensory teaching where literacy is never the starting point. Religion-neutral exercises and participatory symbols which parallel the ceremonies and rituals of the world's traditions, enable

the children to become aware of their own spirituality and thereby empathise with the experience of believers, which is no longer 'nothing to do with us or anything that we know'. They are all combined in re-enactment.

This technique, which I have developed over some years, means that pupils always learn in a circle sitting around or within large sets representing the topic or tradition they are studying. These fill the classroom, often covering almost the entire floor space. There may be candles, a fountain, flowers, fabric, driftwood, sand, water, scented oils and incense and always music; music to come in to, gently faded so the children gradually quieten, music to mark transitions – 'When this track finishes you should have done...' – music to create atmosphere, to engage and inspire, but most of all to calm and soothe – especially me!

The result of this gradual but revolutionary transition in our large comprehensive school, where 40% of the pupils have special needs, has been to transform behaviour and motivation, increase exam recruitment and raise the profile of RE throughout the whole school.

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details of courses in Theatre of
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