

The Act of Creation

How can teachers help pupils become more independent and take a more active role in their learning through a traditional subject like Religious Education? **Anita Maggie** and **Dedree Diston** did some action research into the question.



This research project was carried out over six months and was collaboratively designed by Anita, Maggie and the class teacher, Dedree Diston. We wanted to explore whether a more art-based approach, taught alongside a traditional text-based Roman Catholic (RC) scheme of work, would enhance children's creative thinking. It was considered by the three partners that an art-based approach would provide more opportunities for personal expression and interpretation of RC stories, events and teachings and would offer the chance to discuss personal ideas and opinions. Although the RC scheme of work did ask for opinions from the children and reflections (a key skill of thinking), most opportunities for this were through the form of writing such as a letter, or retelling of a particular event in the religious calendar rather than a more creative spoken or visual model.

What is Creative Thinking?

Creative thinking involves children initiating their own learning, having opinions, possessing choices and making decisions. Due to an over crowded curriculum it seems sad that much of children's learning is prescribed with targets related to time, subjects and assessment resulting in little or no opportunity for children to make decisions (Taylor S, 2008) or initiate a Radical Constructivist mode of learning (Von Glaserfeld, 2007). In our experiences as



Senior Lecturers in Initial Teacher Training, occasionally trainee teachers have felt scared about allowing children to make free choices especially in art due to noise and mess, which is not an unusual feeling for many teachers, or allow free discussion in RE in case the children go off the learning objective and the teacher's confidence is affected (Eke R, 2005) and so they teach both in a restricted manner which could be seen as uncreative teaching and hence uncreative learning.

In agreement with Sue Cowley, we consider that for a child to be able to think they need space and quiet time before being able to communicate what they believe to be reality (2004). She considers that a classroom which is noisy can confuse children, yet isn't some form of noise necessary when art and religious discussion are

involved? It's important that children have an opportunity to explore what they know and understand about their environment through practising thinking skills such as reflection and creative skills such as verbal and expressive communication. If this means the classroom is a little noisy, it only proves that active thinking is happening because opinions are being discussed.

The NACCE defined creativity as 'imaginative activity fashioned so as to produce outcomes that are both original and of value.' (1999: 29) and since then organisations such as Creative Partnerships and the Department for Children Schools and Families have considered what they believe creativity to be and have provided guidance to schools on how to plan and teach it with defined outcome and measures (www.ncaction.org.uk/creativity). Indeed KS3 now have Personal Learning and Thinking goals which are part of the radical overhaul of the Key Stage 3 curriculum. (http://www.qca.org.uk/qca_13476.aspx)

Yet Craft (2000) considers creativity not to necessarily need an objective or an outcome, and that it is more important to provide children with opportunities to feel that there is no right or wrong answer. It is the thinking process of Assimilation, Accommodation and Adaptation (Atkinson 2006:15) and exploration of the world they live in that is important to children's learning. How that process is presented on an individual level is the creative part of thinking, not the finished piece.

To use creativity and thinking is personal and at times it can be difficult for a child to express what they think to another in a spoken or written mode. Art is another form of communication and so is a perfect partner for Religious Education. This project therefore investigated how allowing children the opportunity to explore their opinions and values through an RE based art project encouraged creativity and thinking.

Using Art and RE to stimulate Personal Learning and Thinking skills

Just as RE is significant in the life of the young people within this Roman Catholic Primary School, so is art. The children were not only exposed to different artists (and within this scheme it was the art of Marc Chagall, which contained images of floating candles and surreal representations of dream-like states), but they were also allowed the freedom to express their ideas, opinions and feelings through the medium of art. The children looked at the way paintings were painted, the effects that the painting techniques created, learned how to hold their brush, expressed by drawing using pastels what they thought God's love looked like, made figures using plasticine, planted their Lenten promises, put their hand prints on flower pots



and drew onto acetate. They were encouraged to question what they saw and designed and how they felt about their work and, most importantly were given the freedom to observe critically.

Barnes (2002) suggests many ways that children can be exposed to art work. He says they, learn so much from artists and designers but only if teachers develop high level thinking techniques.

He refers to Pointon (1986), who in his article states that asking questions such as 'What is it?' 'How did it come to be here?' 'Where is it?' etc can help children understand how to look at works of art. (Barnes, 2002:181) And so puzzling questions were what we incorporated into the project so that the main aims were met.

Key Aims of the Project:

- Develop creativity within R.E and Art
- Develop thinking skills

Learning objectives related to creativity and thinking skills

- To use the work of an artist to stimulate thinking skills
- To produce art that is based on personal reflection
- To generate original art based on a religious theme using a variety of mediums to express ideas
- To consider and reflect on personal ideas of Roman Catholic doctrine

Findings

The implications of this research project provided opportunities for creativity and the development of thinking skills. It has also provided a fantastic method for assessing Attainment Target 2 (Learning from Religion) in RE and the development of emotional literacy.

It showed that the art activities allowed the children to reflect on their personal belief systems, express themselves freely and develop thinking skills such as communication and reflection. They expressed these through a method that was not leading them towards the 'right' answer or where they needed an array of language skills to express their inner-most thoughts.

When we asked the children to draw what they thought



God's love looked like we were amazed with the results. The comments below are from the children when they were asked to explain what they had drawn.

"I think that God's love is like lots of squiggly lines that are bright in colour. I like bright colours. I have used lots of bright colours because God's love makes me feel happy'.

'God's love is like a bright red heart that has no ending'.

As the responses to a religious theme or question were seen to be more honest, it appeared that the children were not only becoming more reflective and insightful but it was noticed that the teachers were gaining evidence of AT2 which for RE can be a difficult target to prove.

" Well I done a cloud and a sun popping out because I didn't want to draw fire and the sun is very bright as well and I drew a hand and finger 'cause I think the Holy Spirit touches us. And I've done a heart because the Holy Spirit is Jesus and it's nearly the same thing because it love us."

Art and RE are vital within a child's learning experience of the world around them, and exposing them to the work of artists was a fantastic and enlightening experience because, in our opinion, it helped children develop knowledge, the skill of thinking and creatively expressing themselves.

During one lesson the R.E objective was to 'know that the Sacrament of Reconciliation is a celebration of God's love and forgiveness'. We taught this objective through an art based approach by asking the children to look at a sculpture of a pair of hands, and think of five 'W' questions such as 'what', 'where', 'why', 'who', 'when' about the sculpture. Using plasticine they were asked to make a representation of what God could be holding in his hands. The children made some amazing and detailed models and commented:

'My model is of a hug because God is always hugging

us with his love’,

‘My model is an angel as God sends his angels to look after us’,

‘God is holding my favourite book’.

We will always remember one child who when we started this research wanted to wash his fingers as he had got paint on them. At the end of the project he said to us:

“Look at me Miss. I’m a real artist as my hands are full of paint”



What did this project tell us about Creativity and Thinking skills?

This project has re-enforced what we already considered to be a truth: that when two subjects are taught in tandem or through a theme it can develop much more than just subject knowledge. Children in this project were able to explore aspects of their Catholic identity without feeling they had to say the ‘right’ answer. They were given the opportunity to discuss puzzling questions and refine or challenge previously held understandings.

Because they were permitted to explore their own opinions, ask questions and also express “I don’t know” as an answer, they practised thinking skills. The art then gave them opportunity to explore such reflecting and thinking processes and express them any form of art they wished (using Marc Chagall as a stimulus). They were able to express their thoughts in a manner that was personal and creative to them. Whereas one child may have presented their thoughts as a jumble of colours and squiggles another may have presented them as a clear definite drawing with some writing. Both examples demonstrated that thinking and creativity were happening, hence personalised

learning was being catered for. They also identified how art can be used to assess young children’s understanding of a personal concept such as Jesus’ resurrection and what it means to them as a Roman Catholic: a difficult concept for any adult to explore and articulate, never mind a child of 8, and so even more difficult to assess.

Future Developments

Several areas have developed from this small scale research project and we may put what we have learnt about the natural relationship between art and RE into a Teacher’s Pack with resources and planning ideas that focus on the key aims of this project: We may also develop future projects into the area of emotional literacy and art, and research the experiences students have of learning and teaching Art within an ITT degree.

Maggie Northcott is now the key author of a book that explores creative approaches to teaching primary RE which is due to be published by Pearson Education in 2009.

Anita Chamberlain chambera@edgehill.ac.uk

Maggie Northcott northcom@edgehill.ac.uk

References

- Atkinson C (2006) *Making sense of Piaget* (2nd edition) London. Routledge
- Barnes R (2002) *Teaching Art to Young Children*. London. Routledge
- Cowley S (2004) *Getting the buggers to Think*. London. Continuum
- Craft A (2000) *Creativity Across the Primary School*. London. Routledge
- Eke R, Lee J, Clough N ‘Whole-class interactive teaching and learning in religious education: transcripts from four primary classrooms’. *British Journal for RE* 27:2 159 -172
- National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education (1999). *All Our futures: Creativity, Culture and Education*. Sudbury: DfEE.
- Taylor S ‘One Size Doesn’t Fit all’. *Times Education Supplement* 11.01.2008
- Wenham, M (2003) *Understanding Art – A Guide for Teachers*. London. Paul Chapman Publishing.
- Von Glaserfeld E (2007) *Key works in Radical Constructivism*. Rotterdam. Sense Publishers

Learning Across the Curriculum: Creativity

www.ncaction.org.uk/creativity

Personal Learning and Thinking Skills http://www.qca.org.uk/qca_13476.aspx

**Art and RE Thinking Skills Research Project 2008
Our Lady's and St Edward's Catholic Primary School and Edge Hill University**

Lesson 1	Objective AT1 Reflect on how change and good/poor choices (sin)	Language Choice Sin	Links to Catechism
<p>Introduction</p> <p>Use Art as the stimulus. Introduce the children to a painting of an image where the theme is 'choice'. Discuss the painting. What questions do they have? What is happening in the painting?</p> <p>In talk partners think of an example of a good choice</p> <p>Share as a class a few examples</p> <p>In talk partners think of an example of a poor choice</p> <p>Share as a class a few examples</p> <p>On their own ask the children to think/reflect on how they feel when they have made a poor choice</p> <p>Ask if they can think of a word that Roman Catholics use when someone has made a poor choice ...</p> <p>Explain Art and RE activity</p>	<p>Anita to discuss</p> <p>Maggie to do</p> <p>Extra adult to collect the examples and write on speech bubbles that are placed on the board</p> <p>Anita to explain art activity</p>	<p>Observation focus</p> <p>Image is displayed on the whiteboard.</p> <p>Focus on their responses to the questions...do they know the diff between good and poor choices?</p> <p>Is the word Sin used by the children?</p>	
<p>Art and RE Activity</p> <p>They are given a piece of paper and are asked to look at the pastels on their desks.</p> <p>Their task is to use the pastels and produce an image that represents how they feel when they have made a good choice.</p> <p>They then have to produce an image of a 'negative' choice</p> <p>Their task is to use the pastels and produce an image that represents how they feel when they have made a bad choice.</p> <p>They can use any colours they wish that represent good and poor choices or sin</p> <p>When they are exploring this through pastels the adults will come and collect any words or thoughts they have about making poor choices .</p> <p>The aim is to compare the images and colours used from the 'good choice' and 'bad choice' and how they use the resources to express their emotions.</p>	<p>Anita and Maggie move around the groups asking them to explain their image and to collect any ideas/thoughts and words about sin and making poor choices</p>	<p>Observation focus</p> <p>Focus on the discussion in the groups - focus on one group perhaps - see if they are discussing the colours and why they are using them to represent sin</p>	

<p>Plenary</p>	<p>Talk through the words and thoughts they had whilst drawing their image...if anyone wishes to, show their images/drawings. List key words on the board.</p> <p>Watch a small aspect of 'Finding Nemo' – the part where Nemo makes a poor choice and disobeys his father with a consequence that isn't good</p> <p>Discuss with the children after the clip Why did Nemo disobey his father? In talk partners discuss what Nemo should do about making a poor choice and disobeying his father – discuss any examples (Try and gain the word forgiveness)</p> <p>Who do Catholics disobey when they make a poor choice? (sin)</p> <p>Explain that next week we will look at what Catholics do after they have made a poor choice.</p>	<p>Anita to explore Maggie to lead with Anita to team teach questions</p>	<p>Observation focus</p> <p>In talk partners see whether anyone understands the concept of sin as turning away from God or have some embryonic idea of this Catholic concept.</p>
<p>Resources</p>	<p>Pastels (from EH) Paper Pencils White boards White board pens Thought bubbles on clip board Speech bubbles on clip board</p>		<p>Anita and Maggie to lead, Dedrée to observe and collect data</p>