

Entering the Theatre of Learning : It is like the lights going down at a cinema – it creates a sense of something about to happen

Sue Phillips

Sue Phillips received the Shap Award 2004 for her development of the 'Theatre of Learning'.

Imagine that you are pupil entering a room lit only by tealights, an ocean scented candle and the overhead projector. The sound of mystical music fills the room. On the floor, in the centre of the circle of chairs is a display that represents an island. It is covered in plants, shells, driftwood and beautiful evening dresses in an assortment of bright colours.

There is a gold candleabra with burnt out candles, a broken champagne glass and an overturned bottle. In the corner of the island, above the shoreline, is an old wooden castle, spot lit and swathed in white net to represent the clouds that drifted silently in and out of the windows at the beginning of the story it illustrates.

As the children take their seats, all talking, I gently fade the music so that it is still audible, maintaining the atmosphere of peace and relaxation that I aim to create in all my lessons.. As I do so, they cease their chatter and I begin. It is like the lights going down in the cinema. It creates a sense of something about to happen.

This is the Theatre of Learning where children learn, not from behind desks, but in a *circle*. In this they learn to share feelings during trust building and listening skills exercises which foster trust and respect.

They are always taught in a *multi sensory environment* within and around large sets which represent whatever religious tradition they are learning about. There may be fabric, plants, flowers, water, stones, wood as well as the artefacts and food that belong to the tradition they are studying.

The classroom becomes in turn a Synagogue, in which *Ceremonies and Rites of Passage are re-enacted* in costume, a Hindu temple for the celebration of Puja and a lively wedding, or a Buddhist shrine where pupils learn to meditate and reflect on suffering in their own lives. Spreading fabric on the floor and setting out artefacts as we proceed through a lesson in a non specialist room, the children create a cave, sitting round a fire with cave paintings projected across the ceiling. They might unpack a Gurdwara or a Mosque, discovering the symbolism of the building as they create it.

Every kind of Christian Church appears as the pupils re enact the powerful and dramatic Easter Orthodox midnight service, filling the darkened room with candlelight as the liturgy plays and they take bread and wine from a long handled spoon, or sit in silence, in a circle, as a group of Friends would do, or dancing and clapping to “John the Revelator” from the film “Blues Brothers 2000” to capture the atmosphere of a gospel service . All the time they are concentrating on how this makes them feel and using those feelings to enable them to understand how regular worship makes Christians feel.

There is always *music*; music creating the mood, sustaining an atmosphere of calm or excitement,

or a flavour of the culture the children are entering into.

Pupils learn to understand and empathise with worship through ***Religion Neutral Exercises*** which parallel the rituals and ceremonies of the believers. Holding a tiny box containing a special wish or dream against forehead, heart and hand helps children understand how Jews feel praying with tefillin. No longer are these actions funny or odd. While knowledge understanding and the ability to evaluate for an examination are being developed (“Is it silly or a waste of time to dress up for prayer?”– discuss, or, “How does daily prayer affect a believer?”) but prejudice is being eroded as pupils realise that people who *appear* so different from themselves, through outward cultural expression, are in their fundamental spirituality, not so.

Participatory Symbols, are actions which Paul Tillich in his book “Religious Language” says are things we *do* which enable us to understand something that we might not have done with words alone. Lighting candles for someone special, writing about something you wish to change in your life, putting regrets into a stone and washing them away in water all help children to get in touch with, and develop, their own spirituality while understanding and empathising with those whose beliefs are very different from their own. This is what I call ***hitting the spiritual target***

Entering the Theatre of Learning takes over the children’s own agenda, calming, soothing and enveloping them in another world, a world of stories and the imagination, of reflective exercises and role play. Within moments a lively class of teenagers put their own agenda aside to come and play, to share powerful feelings with each other, in an atmosphere of trust and respect.

Literacy is never the starting point

These multi sensory circles are the *starting* point for the learning, it is never literacy.

Literacy comes after the learning, after the experience, which is what religion is . It is not something to be learned from a book.

Religion is essentially about the unknowable, or to be more accurate the indescribable, however, we teachers persist in *describing* it in endless detail to our children, to little, or no effect. We describe buildings, worship, beliefs, rituals and when we have finished describing these things we set the children to *read* about them from a textbook or a worksheet and summarise the information back in *writing*. The biddable and literate do, the unbiddable and the less literate set fire to their hair, as my group of disaffected 16 year olds did seven years ago, when they refused to sit their exam because they were so bored.

Using role play and visualisation to create empathy and develop values

“My name is Ernest, I am a lawyer. I have found out why our children are disappearing and the police do not seem to be able to trace them. It is the *police* who are taking them. I believe we have no choice but to leave now, tonight. There are three boats waiting for us at the docks. Tell no one. The boats leave at midnight. Be there”.

Ernest, his wife Sophia and their tiny daughter Verity escape from genocide only to find themselves sold into slavery in a distant land, delivered by a captain who takes money twice, while also dumping the weak, old and sick overboard on their perilous journey.

This twelve episode adventure, which invites each pupil to become a character in the story, enables them to feel, through their imagination, what it might be like to become a refugee. It was changing attitudes that I felt was vital as my pupils seethed with resentment towards the migrant pupils entering our school. As they left our seaside town, in their imaginations, in the rubber boats that many of them have in their garages and escaped to the coast of France, they were aghast to find they would not be let in "But we're in rubber boats!" they exclaimed – "we have nothing! - what is going to happen to us?" I smiled and shrugged. Realisation began to dawn.

Each ten minute episode, told at the beginning of a lesson, raises moral issues which the rest of the lesson is spent exploring. When is it right to take a life? What rights do refugees, or indeed, anyone, have? The pupils looked at issues current in the press, such as human trafficking and boot camps, where difficult American teenagers are sent by their parents for reform. They explored issues of blindness, and disability, freedom, violence and war. The starting point was always "what would it be like if this was happening to you?"

It is this *experience* in the classroom which builds the understanding and empathy which fulfils the true purpose of religious education. This must surely be to understand ourselves and others better, to learn to live together peacefully and to acquire the beliefs and values that will enable us to rise above our own desires and do just that. Religious Education must be about *more* than the acquisition of knowledge

Does it work?

Teaching a unit on wealth and poverty for GCSE I was faced with a group of sixteen year olds who believed poverty in the developing world to be nothing to do with us, money should be spent on our own country first, but, they told me, poverty in Britain is the fault of the poor themselves.

In the course of the lessons they became the people to whom this happened listening to their story then making themselves shelters and finding food from the rubbish scattered around the classroom.

These techniques changed the pupils perception of poverty in Britain and India (see *RE Today*, Summer 2005)

"This changed the way I felt. I'd always known poverty as figures rather than people. It made me want to help" Abbie

"the story will make me feel differently next time I walk past somebody in the street" Cory

"I think the lesson helped people to realise how bad a lot of peoples lives actually are and this in turn made realise how lucky they are" David

"It made me feel sad and want to help those who do not have a lot!" Becky

HMI on each of their frequent visits to our school which is currently in special measures have enthusiastically endorsed these teaching methods. An inspector sat in on a discussion with year eleven towards the end of the unit on poverty." I have taught in this area " he said "I know how entrenched these children's attitudes are. I am astonished by the degree of understanding and

compassion these young people have shown today. This is testimony to the kind of work you have been doing with them”

At the end of the year we all wrote goodbye messages to each other. These two, from the non exam class, who had accompanied Ernest and his family on their journey to freedom, I will treasure, even though I will never know who wrote them.

“Thanks for giving me the chance to feel new things. It has changed how I think and do things”

“Your lessons have made me think about life so differently. I even question things I do and things I feel or others around me, I feel we should feel all feelings, even anger, because if we didn’t feel the world would not be right. This is just a little message to thank you for affecting us the way you do in your lessons.”

Multi sensory, experiential learning raises academic achievement.

It does this because the ***most able*** are stimulated by the challenging questions raised by the experience and are motivated to read, research and write to the highest levels of our national curriculum.

It fosters ***inclusion*** because the ***least able*** can contribute and receive equally in a multi sensory lesson where literacy does not create a barrier to learning. *After* the lesson they are motivated to write because it is from memory, not text. They write from the memory of stories they have heard and seen acted out with artefacts and gestures. They remember the food they have tasted and what it symbolises. The rituals they have enacted enable them to describe and understand traditions very different from their own.

Every learning style is being used at some point in lessons which are holistic, engaging the intellect, the emotions and the imagination.

The teachers around Britain who are embracing these methods are finding themselves soothed and calmed by the music, excited by the creativity it allows them to show and fulfilled by the real spirituality this teaching style promotes. - making RE make sense.

Summary – some recommendations

- Consider creating a multi sensory display for your pupils. A simple one that can be put in a box and carried with you will suffice
- Consider using music to create an atmosphere, calm and soothe the pupils – and yourself
- Think about reading, retelling and writing your own stories to create a concrete platform from which to teach abstract concepts, beliefs and values
- Plan your lessons to hit the spiritual target - the universal spirituality within us all whether we belong to a religious tradition or not.

- Devise religion neutral exercises and participatory symbols to enable pupils to empathise with religious traditions other than their own
- Use role play and visualisation to take children into experiences that they might not otherwise relate to
- Give yourself permission to play, have fun, create some theatre in your classroom and take your children back to the fire to receive the oral tradition, the wisdom arising from your own and their spirituality.

Sue's series of Teacher resource files on the Theatre of Learning are available from www.sfe.co.uk where samples can be viewed.