



Thinking outside the box

Teaching RE creatively

It's RE, but not as we know it!

I was talking to a Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT) at one school I visit. She told me she had rarely seen any RE lessons taught and the ones she had observed seemed to follow the same tired formula each time: tell children a 'religious' story and then ask the children to retell the same story in their own words. I suspect that RE lessons like this are the norm in too many classrooms across the country.

In my last school I released the RE co-ordinator for one day a week. RE was on the timetable for my day with Year 6 and I followed the teacher's planning.

For ten weeks I had to tell a story and then follow it up with a prose passage, a comprehension passage, or an exercise in writing. In reality, RE was being used to develop literacy skills instead of helping children understand spiritual things. The

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children liked hearing the stories, but their enjoyment was always tainted by the fact that a writing task would inevitably follow. The thought of having to mark yet another set of 30 books for spelling, punctuation and grammar took the shine off the lesson for me too!

Hand jives and funky music

More recently, I went into a school to teach the Bible for one hour. At the end of that hour the children were clamouring for more. The difference? We didn't do any writing! Instead, we used hand jives, funky music, rap and drama. Some stories were acted out by the children themselves, using props. They would read from simple scripts I had written. Other stories involved the children adding sound effects. We used brainstorming techniques and hand signs to remember key facts. This brought the subject alive and left the kids wanting more – especially those 'lively', 'challenging', 'naughty' or 'inattentive' pupils who add to the stress levels of any teacher.

I would like to set a challenge for those of you teaching RE in primary schools. I would like to invite you to start thinking outside the box. Forget the formula of literacy and numeracy hours. Don't

worry about making sure there's written evidence – for the moment. Instead, start to imagine a world where you can teach what's on your heart, not what someone else has ordered you to teach.

Dare to be different

Begin thinking outside the box. There are no restrictions in terms of space or budget. The lesson can extend beyond its allotted one hour (or twenty minute!) slot. It can even spill into other areas of the curriculum. Children don't have to sit on chairs at desks. They don't have to be silent. They don't have to come up with 'the' right answer, because there are many 'right answers'. They can say what they actually think and feel, not what they've been taught to think and feel. They can respond in ways that are appropriate for them, not in the formulaic sit down and write about...

You can teach in a way that addresses the special learning styles of the children. You can tap into their interests, experiences, gifts and talents. Likewise, you can harness your own creativity making the most of your strengths rather than exposing your weakness.

Reaching everyone

Let's think for a moment about learning styles. A lot of research has been done on this topic in recent years. We are probably all aware of the main styles, even though we might use different names for them.

In her book *Learning Styles: Reaching Everyone God Gave You to Teach*, Marlene LeFever labels four main styles:

- Imaginative learners
- Analytic learners
- Common sense learners
- Dynamic learners.

Here's how she defines them:

Imaginative learners can easily share from their past experience to provide a context for learning. They may ask: *Why do I need to know this? Why is it important to me?*

Analytic learners need to learn something new in the lesson. They may ask: *What do I need to know? What are the facts, stories, concepts?*

Common sense learners need to see if what they are learning makes sense to them. They may ask: *How does this work? How can I use this?*

Dynamic learners find creative ways to use what they've learned. They may ask: *What can this become? How can I put what I've learned into practice?*



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Anne is now the Children's Pastor at Riverside Church in Birmingham, where she is responsible for 150 children aged 0–11, and leads a team of 80 volunteers. Anne is also a Bible Explorer presenter, and visits local primary schools to teach the whole of the Old Testament in just five one-hour lessons, using drama, storytelling, games and music.

Anne helped to write and edit RE lesson plans for the CD Rom which accompanies the schools' edition of *The Jesus Quest* DVD. These plans are guaranteed to help teachers think and teach outside the box!

Are you ready to allow yourself and your pupils to experience freedom, excitement, choice and uncertainty?

Marlene LeFever's ideas have been taken up by the main publishers of Sunday School / Junior Church curricula both in the USA and England.

Learners can also be categorised in the following way:

- body learners
- music learners
- word learners
- visual learners
- people learners
- self learners
- logic / maths learners
- environment learners.

For example, a people learner enjoys team tasks, role-play, and responds to pictures of real people. A body learner enjoys being active, moving around, making things or playing games. A self learner needs time and space for reflection, is able to produce diaries of their thoughts and responds well to questions like 'What would you do if?'

How many of these learning styles could we incorporate into our lessons? Wouldn't that help children to think, 'Wow! That was a good lesson!' If we address a child's specific learning style, we can help her/him to feel affirmed and learn well. If we consistently ignore a child's preferred learning style, that spells trouble, as I'm sure we are all too aware!

Planning for success

When planning lessons like this, we need to begin by acknowledging our own preferred learning style – because, if we are not careful, this is the way we will tend to teach. It is, if you like, our 'default setting'. It is (in the short-term, at least) helpful for those children who share our preferred learning style, but it is actually an obstacle for the majority of children who learn differently.

Hence, we need to make a conscious effort to teach in a different style for part of the lesson. I am not a visual learner, so to plan art activities freaks me out. On the other hand, I love having discussion type lessons because I learn well from discussing ideas with other people.

Are you brave enough to help the children you teach spread their wings and allow them to fly up, up and away?

Permission to fly

Maybe you can imagine a lesson where children are free to choose which learning activity to follow through on! (Now, for many of us: how scary is that?!)

Remember, just as adults respond to stories in different ways, so do children. Some will want to reflect, others talk, others do something with their bodies, others put words to how they're feeling; others create music or movement, or create visuals or graphics or use IT.

We believe in a creator God. He created us to be creative. I believe He wants us to teach children about him – creatively. Are you brave enough to help the children you teach spread their wings and allow them to fly up, up and away? Are you bold enough to leave behind a curriculum limited by clock-watching, control-freakery and tick boxes? Are you ready to allow yourself and your pupils to experience freedom, excitement, choice and uncertainty? Would you like permission to plan and teach the best RE lessons of your careers? You could produce dynamic lesson plans and fresh learning and teaching resources for your school. Just think of it. You could help release your colleagues from their pedagogical straightjackets. In so doing, you could help to liberate hundreds of children from dull listen-to-a-story-then-tell-it-in-your-own-words RE lessons.

Big ideas

Decide to try it with just one lesson during the next half-term, as it will be time-consuming. Give yourself plenty of time and space to plan. Resist the temptation to get into fine detail straight away. Don't spend an hour taking one idea and then differentiating it for your five ability groups! Think big. Think crazy. Start with *What if?* not *What will keep the boss happy?* Deal with the fine details later. Let your mind soar and write down five or six 'big ideas'.

Then, start to consider which learning styles will be addressed by which ideas. Remember: don't automatically go for the one that you feel most comfortable with. Instead, choose an idea that more easily incorporates a range of styles that will reach the children not usually reached during literacy and numeracy lessons.

Time and space

Be realistic about how much time you will need to do it, and if necessary use more than one lesson, or extend into the other curriculum areas. Give yourself, and the children, enough time to be creative.

If you need extra resources such as additional people, special equipment or a different room, make sure you plan for these to be available well in advance – and have Plan B up your sleeve... just in case.

Think carefully about how to use the room and what the children will actually do during the lesson. Don't automatically plan for the usual groups of children – why not try mixing it up, or giving a free choice, or having a rotation of two or three activities?

For specific examples of how to plan lessons like this, see the schools' edition of *The Jesus Quest* DVD. This includes a CD Rom containing tried and tested lesson plans guaranteed to help teachers think and teach outside the box!

Efforts and outcomes

Consider how you will assess the effectiveness of the lesson. How will you/they record what has been learned? It doesn't have to be written down. For example, efforts and outcomes can be recorded on audio or video tape, or in a photograph. You could try a post-it note stuck in an appropriate place, or putting a symbol under an appropriate heading. After all, assessments and evaluations can be outside the (tick) box too.

This may sound daunting. It certainly cannot be squeezed into the half hour you usually allow for RE planning after school. But, if you feel you can, please have a go. The rewards will be worth it. Your class will enjoy the lesson; you'll enjoy the lesson; and you'll come home feeling that – just for once – you've taught from your heart and not from a rule book!

■ Anne Roche

Reference

Marlene LeFever (2002) *Learning Styles: Reaching Everyone God Gave You to Teach*. David C Cook Publishing Company.

Inspirational Films (2004) *The Jesus Quest* (2-disc schools' DVD) (Cert PG) Agape.

