

It's Oh-So Quiet



If you plan peaceful moments of reflection, children will have the time and space to think about the big questions posed by RE, says **Peter Greaves**. And the same principle can be used to nurture creativity across the curriculum...



You can waste it, save it, run out of it, take it and spend it. You can even make it, but you never, ever have enough of it. I'm talking about time. Whichever year group you're teaching, there will always be pressures that result from not having enough hours in the day. The big danger with this is that every lesson is squeezed and rushed, with the joy of learning diminished by every tick of the second hand.

RE is one of those subjects that can offer an antidote to this hustle and bustle. Learning is transformed when time and space is given to pupils. The two key strands of RE, 'Learning about Religions' and 'Learning from Religion' come together to inform pupil understanding when there is the opportunity to reflect on what has been learnt. Giving pupils a chance to mull over the big questions in life allows a synergy between 'Learning about' and 'Learning from' to take place, and it is this that gives RE its unique flavour.

This is very hard to do every lesson, but in each unit of work there will be particular sessions that lend themselves to giving children a thinking workout.

So here are some suggestions as to how you can create time and space for pupils to ruminate on their learning.

The blank piece of paper

This is an incredibly simple but effective tool for helping pupils to keep their focus during times of quiet. Give children a plain piece of paper and tell them this is theirs to fill with their thoughts in words, pictures or both. Resist the temptation to give them suggestions and examples, rather tell them whatever they want to ask you, the answer is 'Yes!'. Make sure colours are accessible in such a way that others won't have to be disturbed when someone wants 'a blue'. It is also important to tell pupils that if they just want to leave the paper blank, that is fine as well. Tell them to use the paper like a blank screen and 'project' their thoughts onto it. It's amazing how common it is for pupils to pick up a pencil in the last five minutes and produce real quality as a result of the thought that's been put into their work.

Finding a focus

Candles are a powerful tool in helping children to focus on their thoughts. Tea lights work fine and it is worth giving pupils one of their own, rather than asking them to share a candle - which invites collaboration when we are trying to encourage their ability to look inwards. Tell pupils you would like them to look into the flame and focus on the question you have set them. Make Post-it notes available and allow them to jot down anything that occurs to them during their quiet time. Again, reinforce that just looking and thinking is a good way to spend the time, underlining that it is the process not the product that has value. Follow it immediately with some talk time, allowing pupils to verbalise their thoughts, making notes of anything they want to remember.

Please remember to alert your Premises Officer before trying this, so that the necessary fire alarm precautions are taken!

A spot of magic

With older children, it is possible to develop their independence by giving them more control over these quiet times. It can be really effective, within sensible

Getting it right

IF THESE ACTIVITIES ARE NOT WORKING, THIS MIGHT BE WHY...

Whichever activity you choose to do, first remember the five Es that will make this exercise successful.

1 Enquiry

Times of quiet only work when pupils have something substantial to think about. Without this, pupils will quickly go off task and the experience will not be as valuable. The best way to focus children as they begin their time of quiet is to give them a question. It may be as simple as 'What has this lesson made you think about?' But it may be more specific to the lesson, e.g. "Why do think this story is so important to believers?"

2 Environment

It's very hard to be at peace in a chaotic environment! Make sure pupils are in surroundings conducive to calm reflection. It is worth finding music that is calming, which can be used repeatedly to create a 'soundtrack for stillness'. The best pieces are those that you find calming yourself. If you're a jazz fan, try *Flamenco Sketches* from Miles Davis' *Kind of Blue*. If you prefer KT Tunstall, try *Heal Over*. If you go down the classical route, make sure it's calming such as *Venus* from Holst's *Planet Suite*. This is not a time for stimulating, fast paced baroque.

3 Expectation

Pupils cannot just 'be quiet and still' without practice and training. Start with age-appropriate shorter times and gradually increase both the duration and your expectations of how they use it.

4 Encouragement

If pupils find these times hard, treat them gently and individually. Tell pupils you have high expectations, but you understand it's hard. Prepare them by saying that if you see someone making it difficult for others to be still, you will simply tap them on the shoulder and they can sit in an agreed place.

5 Engagement

It is important that once the pupils are engaged, you resist the temptation to bustle around doing jobs while the class is quiet and still. They will see your busyness and it will send the wrong message about what this time is for. It is better if you wander gently round, giving reassuring smiles and spreading a feeling of calm.

Once these foundations are in place, then you can explore a variety of methods that will allow pupils to express their thoughts in the time you have given them.

It is important that once the pupils are engaged, you resist the temptation to bustle around doing jobs

boundaries, to allow them to choose their own space where they can think and be still.

Begin by asking pupils to think of somewhere that really relaxes them. It may be their bedroom or on the beach. It could be on the swing in their back garden or lying on the sofa. Tell them that you would like them to find a 'magic spot' within the classroom boundaries you have set and whilst sitting there, to imagine they are in their relaxing place.

Try and let children push the boundaries - some will want to sit under tables, for example. A helpful ground rule is that no one can choose a magic spot that is a distraction to someone else. Magic spots can become regular places where pupils go when they need to think or have a mental break. Some pupils ask to go to their magic spot during reading time. When the weather is good enough, giving pupils the chance to choose a magic spot outside is another way to make thinking times special.

When, as teachers, we are planning lessons or assemblies, we know that we are at our most creative and lucid when we make time and space for our thoughts to germinate and grow. By making the most of natural learning opportunities, we are helping pupils to develop key creative skills that not only help them to deal with the big questions of RE, but will help them prepare for the busy and noisy world into which they are growing up.

