

Ten tips for learning outside the classroom

Bored with your own classroom? Not happy inside four walls? Sharon Artley and Alistair Ross give you ten tips on how RE can get out into the open.

A child doesn't learn just by sitting at a desk but through many experiences and situations. This is an obvious point. Perhaps opportunities could be better exploited by schools and in RE. Direct encouragement is now on offer.

The DCSF-backed *Learning Outside the Classroom** manifesto proclaims that, 'every young person should experience the world beyond the classroom as an essential part of learning and personal development, whatever their age ability or circumstances'. There are eight sectors in the project, one of which is 'Sacred Space'. This encompasses not only places of worship but also other locations that create the possibility of reflection, inspiring spiritual engagement.

Learning Outside the Classroom can improve academic achievement. It can also nurture confidence and self esteem, engender creativity and inspire active citizenship. Experiences can contribute to community cohesion and apply the principle that 'every child matters'. They can be part of compelling learning and cross-curricular projects encouraged by the new secondary curriculum and the creative curriculum in primary schools.

One of the aims of the manifesto is to 'make learning more engaging and relevant'. Children put this in their own way. One Year 3 pupil commented on visiting a Hindu temple: 'You get more education than sitting in classrooms. You get to interact with everything. You know how to do it rather than just studying it.' Which is, perhaps, another way of saying that RE is about learning *from* religion, as well as *about* it.

1 Have a clear vision of what you want to achieve

Making a visit to a sacred space should never be about 'ticking boxes' or 'because it's part of the syllabus'. Instead, it can engage children in meaningful experiences. It's not about knowing the names of pieces of furniture or even about worship practices. Be clear about the objectives and consider how you can ensure a variety of opportunities for engagement – physically, intellectually and emotionally.

2 Plan any experience carefully as part of an ongoing learning process

Ensure the visit is part of the pupils' ongoing learning experience and development. Talk to any providers involved, as part of the preparation, and ensure the plan is tailored to these needs. Teachers know that pupils need varied, interactive learning experiences. Will there be a speaker at the place of worship? Is this person used to talking to young people? Sometimes hosts are tempted to impart extensive detailed information! Negotiate a careful plan to ensure children are enriched. A visitor from the sacred space could be invited to school before or after the visit, with the possibility of sharing and celebrating the outcomes of project work.

There are often local or authority-based schemes to encourage visits to places of worship. These bodies are used to working with schools and providing suitable learning packages. The Interfaith Education Centre in Bradford is a good example. <http://www.bradfordschools.net/content/view/548/542/>

3 Be confident about the practicalities

There are always practical issues: Toilet facilities? Somewhere to hang coats? Eat lunch? If lunch is provided, is there provision for those who may need to bring their own food? Ensure that the provider knows your timetable, stick to schedule and ensure that you meet your objectives for the visit. It's always worth a final phone call the day before if only to avoid any last-minute worry.

4 Hold a pre-visit briefing to cover protocols and in preparation for the learning experience

It's essential that no offence or embarrassment is caused. Your school's geographical location may mean that meeting with those of other faiths and cultures is limited. In this instance, it will be particularly important to hold a briefing. This should be for both the students *and* adults accompanying the group. Anxieties about protocol and culture could undermine the fulfilment and enjoyment of the visit.

The key is to be confident about what is expected and impart this to the group. There may be religious protocols – removing shoes, covering heads – to share with everyone. Be ready for unprepared children (and adults)! Bring some spare head coverings, or check if there are some at the place of worship. Consider what to do if pupils were to be offered *prashad* – refusal would offend, but it could not just be thrown away.

Details of the religious protocols of the main world faiths can be found on the RE Online website. http://pow.reonline.org.uk/home_1.htm

*Learning Outside the Classroom website: www.lotc.org.uk



Enjoyment, authenticity, verve and activity all flow from learning beyond the classroom walls.

Give an outline of what the students can expect to see and the activities they will be involved in. Handling artefacts, listening to music, looking at photos taken on a preparatory visit, are all useful ways of preparing children for the experience. Ensure there is a chance to ask significant questions and prepare the children to ask them!

5 Engage parents and carers

Communication with parents is a vital part of any preparation. But don't limit this to just the necessary detail and permission slip. Briefly explain why this learning outside the classroom is beneficial to their child. If you know there are sensitivities or possible difficulties, try to head these off with reassurance. You can always include an invitation to parents to contact you if they have any questions. Better still, include some parents as part of the trip. This will have practical benefits on the day, enable parents to share in pupils' education and give adults an eye-opening experience as a spin off.

6 Nurture empathy and understanding

In a world where most of us live multiple parallel lives, any opportunity to engage with 'real' people from different cultures is enriching. Young people have prejudices and misunderstandings, often passed on from adults. Meeting other people can be challenging and can build community cohesion. Encourage pupils to reflect on their feelings and thoughts, not just on the detail of a building. Bridge-building is not limited to ethnicity or faith. Age and class can also be sources of misunderstanding. Try encouraging a link with a group of older people in the community, or pursue the possibility of twinning with another school.

7 Outwards and inwards

To justify the expense of visits and time involved, teachers are often keen to pack in as much as possible. If properly briefed, learners will be clear about what they should be looking out for and involved in a range of meaningful activities.

It is easy to miss the opportunity to provide moments of stillness or reflection, the chance to internalise experiences. Wherever the visit has been – a peace garden or cemetery, a place of worship or just within the school grounds – make time for learners to think about what they have seen and heard, to reflect on the experiences.

For some learners, quiet is uncomfortable but it is often on leaving one's comfort zone that the learning happens. Pupils might write a poem or letter in response or to express their inner feelings.

8 The big picture

Visits can get bogged down in minutiae: what believers do and how they do it. But get them thinking about the 'why?' Encounters with people of faith are an essential part of the visit. In questioning and dialogue, learners gain an understanding of the importance of belief and belonging.

Consider how pupils will record information on the visit. Using still or video images, mobile phones, sketching or voice recording are preferable to ubiquitous dry worksheets! Encourage students to reflect and then to ask big questions. For example, investigate the effect of belief and practice on the daily lives of individuals; or, in an encounter with a Holocaust survivor, enquire about the nature of good and evil.

9 Did it work?

How do you know whether the visit was successful? Did students learn *about* and *from* religion? Was there meaningful engagement? Will the follow-up work or activities give you all the information you need? Consider devising a way of evaluating the effectiveness of the experience. Involve the learners in the planning of the evaluation. Do this before the visit and share it with the group. Ask accompanying adults for their responses too, and share the findings. In this way, it will be even better next time!

10 Make a difference

A good learning experience should make a difference to children, and adults too. It may even transform attitudes and therefore lives. To ensure this is at least a possibility, it is important to link the visit to follow-up activities, pursued in the classroom. How can the learning and questions raised by a trip be shared with others? An assembly or display may be part of this. The key to making that difference is to take every step to ensure that the visit will have a positive impact on every individual involved.

Case studies providing examples of compelling learning experiences in sacred spaces can be found at: www.reonline.org.uk/sacredspace

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