

Effective learning outside the classroom (LOtC) in RE

WHY IS THIS RELEVANT TO *REsilience*?

Learning Outside the Classroom is a key strand in students' education. National guidance and most local syllabuses recommend it as an enriching aspect of learning in RE¹. Visits and visitors can improve the quality of religious education, contribute to students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development and give many opportunities for exciting cross-curricular learning.

A range of places, including not only places of worship but also museums, galleries, art installations and visits abroad may be organised through RE. Obviously the greatest care needs to be taken ahead of the visit that the community being visited understands the purpose of the visit, and that any speaker or guide from the community is well briefed and understands the care he or she must take not to be critical of other religions or to attempt to proselytise, nor to present as facts claims that are challenged by those of other beliefs. Even so, tensions and objections may still arise when organising visits to places of worship or sacred spaces.

KEY QUESTIONS

How can this help teachers and students to increase their understanding of contentious issues?

Learning Outside the Classroom (LOtC) provides students with occasions to visit religious communities and the opportunity to meet believers. It also contributes to developing good inter-community relations through the two-way interaction and experience between students and community members. Such visits put classroom learning into a wider living context and provide scope for significant and stimulating investigation. In some cases, students may see what believers do and how they behave in an authentic setting. Such experiences provide occasions to engage in meaningful dialogue and give opportunities to challenge prejudice, discrimination and stereotyping.

¹. Increased opportunities for students to take part in RE fieldwork visits and to experience encounters with RE visitors were one of the important recommendations of the Ofsted report 'Transforming RE' (2010).

What classroom challenges might arise in RE?

- There could be objections from both pupils and parents about a visit to a certain place of worship. Reasons for a parental request for their child to be withdrawn from a visit may vary greatly. There could be religious objections, uncertainty or racial prejudice, explicit or covert. Students will sometimes share these views.
- Students and/or their parents may be concerned that the visit will involve participation in religious ritual or worship.

How can teachers address such challenges?

It is important to be aware of sensitivities regarding the timing of visits. Looking at a religious calendar such as that provided by Shap (see Signposts) can avoid clashes with religious holy days that might prevent some pupils from participating. The day a visit takes place might also preclude some students from being involved. For example, a visit on a Friday (particularly in the winter term) could prevent participation from Jewish pupils who needed to leave school early to prepare for Shabbat, or Muslim pupils wishing to perform *jumu'ah* (midday prayers), particularly during Ramadan. Other issues would need to be discussed in the preparation before the visit. These might include: understanding the need for an appropriate dress code (for example, wearing a head covering, modest clothing or removing shoes); the protocol to be followed if offered food.

If a visit is to be residential, there are additional religious factors to be considered. Action should be taken to allow for the observance of dietary laws and prayer. The range of leisure time activities on such visits would need to ensure that pupils' modesty or morality were not compromised. A disco or karaoke evening could be inappropriate for pupils from certain religious groups.

Parents will welcome a reassurance that their children will not be taking part in religious worship or ritual of any kind but will be making the visit for exclusively educational reasons. These should be evident to all within the school community, including students, as well as to parents.

Information may include:

- how a visit to a place of worship will extend students' knowledge, understanding and experience of the world and the role of religion in society;
- the value of experiential learning;
- the opportunities offered for cross-curricular learning and for spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, for example, through the study of music, art, technology or architecture;
- the visit as an integral part of the planned RE curriculum.

Preparation before a visit is key to ensuring clear understanding of protocols, inclusion and the achievement of high quality outcomes. Prior to the visit, it may be possible to invite an

appropriate speaker from the community to speak to students (or to be involved in follow-up work). Many SACREs and local authorities produce advice or guidance documents on taking visits to places of worship.

Some places of worship have long experience in hosting school visits whilst others do not. Teachers may find the experience of the visit is improved if they can spend time with someone who will be involved in hosting the visit to clarify the educational reasons for the visit and the context of school RE. Particular care should be taken to explain that some students will not be prepared, for example, to accept Karah Prashad or bow before a copy of the Guru Granth Sahib on a visit to a gurdwara and that this does not constitute disrespect for the beliefs or the hospitality of the community being visited.

Follow up activities should include an opportunity for students to reflect on the experience of the visit.

NEXT STEPS

Signposts for further reading

REOnline - Lifelong Learning > Subject knowledge <http://subknow.reonline.org.uk/> and BBC religion <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/> both offer detailed information on all the religions which could be studied as part of following an agreed or diocesan syllabus.

Signposts for further resources

Visit the website of your Local Authority or SACRE for guidance on visits to places of worship.

The Sacred Space website at <http://www.refuel.org.uk/sacred-space/index/> offers a wealth of useful resources, as does the Sacred Spaces page of the Learning Outside the Classroom website <http://www.lotc.org.uk/>.

REOnline's Place of Worship section <http://pow.reonline.org.uk/> provides advice, information and ideas regarding visits to places of worship.

A good example of guidance to schools about visits to and visitors from faith communities is offered by Lambeth SACRE and is available at:

http://www.dharmapeople.com/ftp/SACRE_RE/LambethOpeningthewindow.doc

Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) (2010) *Religious education in English schools: non-statutory guidance*

<https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/DCSF-00114-2010>

Signposts for further action

The RE trails website <http://www.retrails.org.uk/> explains the value of RE trails, provides a map of existing trails, contains a range of trails created by RE professionals and a toolkit

with advice for schools to create their own. Teachers can use the toolkit to create a trail in the school's locality, for example, to develop an understanding of community or diversity or to raise questions about belonging.

Parents have a legal right to withdraw their children from part of or the whole of the RE curriculum provided by the school (*Religious Education in English Schools Non Statutory Guidance 2010* - downloadable from <http://publications.education.gov.uk>). If parents choose not to allow their child to participate in a visit to a place of worship, the school should, if possible, discuss this with parents and attempt to allay any fears. Inviting parents to accompany a visit, parents' evenings, assemblies and positive displays of previous visits to places of worship can all be used to promote understanding of religious and cultural diversity and prevent such withdrawal. Where parents from a particular community are reluctant to have their children participate in a visit, concerns can sometimes be allayed by announcing that a respected member of that community – perhaps a parent – will be accompanying the visit.