

Tim Smale's Development Work Exploring literacy-based approaches to learning in RE at Tring School, Tring

Tim was in his second year as a teacher when he began to focus on the question of how to raise students' levels of literacy. He believed that all teachers, regardless of their curriculum area, have a responsibility to address this problem. It had been suggested that a focus on students' literacy can lead teachers to pay greater attention to the differing needs of individual learners (Sylva, 1997). In addition, the use of a variety of strategies for developing literacy leads to more positive classroom management. Students tend to be less distressed when their difficulties with literacy are recognised and help is provided.

Tim began his development project by focussing on one of his Year 9 religious education (RE) classes; he reviewed their written work and reflected on this as evidence of their engagement with the subject. The lack of attention to detail and low level of care taken by the majority of students compared to their performance in other subjects confirmed his view that his students lacked the motivation to learn in this subject. He decided to give them the opportunity to share their views of the subject with him and was surprised by their responses. Many students said that they enjoy RE. Positive comments included:

Even though its RE, its not heavily religious – you don't get religions preached to you – you learn about justice and other worldly subjects.

and

I have given a 7 out of 10 for RE because some of Mr Smale's lessons are really fun because we do role play, paired work and group work which are good.

Despite the rather negative evidence in their written work, the students claimed to enjoy RE. This raised questions about the link between enjoyment and the quality of students' learning, but these comments at least gave Tim grounds for optimism. The positive

attitudes expressed meant that there was scope for improving the student's level of enthusiasm and engagement.

The responses from the students also indicated the kind of activity that they find most engaging. For example, one student said that his favourite subject was Maths because:

We play a lot of games on the Smart Board which is a great way of learning and its also fun for the students. If we did this in RE it would make a real difference to my liking of the subject.

Tim redesigned his next lesson and prepared a variety of resources which required students to interact with text and use language to present ideas in many different forms. Some of these tasks were very traditional and others were more creative, demanding a higher degree of interaction. One activity involved text messaging. Tim had read a report (Marshall, 2006) which claimed that text messaging could help students to improve their literacy skills because it increases phonic awareness and linguistic creativity.

The students' response to these tasks was very positive, as was the impact on the quality of their subsequent written work. In this the students displayed much greater thought, care and attention. Their levels of interest appeared to be raised.

Tim discussed what he was doing during a department meeting. Many colleagues volunteered to use some of his techniques and materials and then give each other feedback. One teacher tried these strategies with a particularly difficult Year 9 group. She then met with Tim for a focused discussion about the experience. She talked about the improvements in the students' work and her own gains in confidence with this group.

Subsequently, Tim continued to develop new resources and ways of working with the students to develop their literacy skills through the RE curriculum. For example, he developed a card-based activity and set up a graffiti wall for students to comment on their experience of it. He then used these comments to help him to plan further activities. He was excited by the fact that the project only in its infancy. He met with the Headteacher and with colleagues from numerous departments to discuss his development work. Tim has now been appointed as whole-school Literacy Co-

ordinator which will give him further opportunities to work with teachers across the school on developing these ideas.

The project has already had impact on practice within the school. Members of the RE department, for example, now meet regularly to share new ways of helping students to access the curriculum. Staff at all stages of their teaching career are involved in this sharing and mutual support. In addition, the English, History and Life Skills Departments are also trialling new approaches stimulated by Tim's work.

References

- Marshall (2006) 'Media Watch'. *Literacy Today*. No. 49, December 2006.
- Sylva, K. (1997) 'Observing practice in the 'Literacy initiative for teachers' (LIFT) and comparison classrooms.' Paper presented at the British Educational Research Association Annual Conference, September 11-14 University of York.