

The **Shap** working party on Education in Religions



Living Difference – The Agreed Syllabus for Hampshire, Portsmouth and Southampton

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The Advent of the QCA's Non Statutory National Framework was greeted with relief that it would lighten the LEA's burden of the five yearly Agreed Syllabus review, but also anxiety that the quality and status of the Framework would discourage local innovation which had always been one of the driving forces of renewal in RE. **Living Difference**, 2006, shows local creativity to be very much alive and well. Its 800 pages comprising a distinctive learning model, extensive guidance and numerous worked up examples of schemes and lessons are also likely to be a significant influence on the review and writing of new syllabuses.

The title, **Living Difference**, fits well with current concerns for diversity and social cohesion and stresses the authors' conviction that students will only develop a coherent pattern of beliefs and values of their own if they can interpret and respond to the different religious and cultural experiences of others. This ability will in turn foster mutual understanding between students of differing religious and cultural backgrounds. These aims, as they show, fit well too with the UN's Convention on the Rights of Children.

To achieve these aims the syllabus presents a new learning model and, breaking with received orthodoxy, only one attainment target: 'Interpreting religion in relation to human experience'. This one AT, however, still incorporates the traditional two: 'learning about' and 'learning from'. If 'human experience' means, at least in part, my experience, and if interpretation means, following Gadamer, restructuring the horizons of my world to incorporate the new phenomenon, then the single AT does indeed embrace both 'about' and 'from'. The five stage learning cycle (Enquiry, Contextualisation, Evaluation, Communication, Application) shows this is the case, as students will have to have 'learned from' in order to, particularly, evaluate and apply.

Nevertheless, I still have some misgivings about rendering AT2 implicit. Significant outcomes for AT2 require higher levels of subject knowledge and teaching expertise making it the more challenging AT, particularly for trainees and NQTs. Any move that reduces the AT's prominence is likely to lead to its further neglect.

To support their teachers in achieving the syllabus' aims the LEAs provide an extensive (800 pages including the primary and secondary handbooks) document that sets out in detail the

learning model and applies this with examples and resources from the six major religions to each of the key stages. In addition there are sections on students with special needs, the promotion of Citizenship, PSHE, Key Skills, and an extensive section on assessment, levels of attainment and descriptors.

A particular strength of the syllabus is the chapter on teaching and learning strategies. Teaching on beliefs and cultural practices can easily uncover discomfort and prejudice and demands both sensitivity on the part of the teacher and an appropriate methodology. An effective approach requires teaching strategies that will lead students to explore and make sense of what initially seemed alien but can, when necessary, challenge complacency and intolerance. Active and experiential learning strategies are essential when dealing with sensitive issues of identity, belief and practice and the syllabus offers 17 different processes including storytelling, creating artefacts, developing rituals, stilling and creative silence, guided imagery, creating music and circle time. Notes are provided on each and examples for primary and secondary phases are worked up in detail.

Experiential processes are particularly prominent in the section dealing with students with learning difficulties. The needs of these students are addressed with care and sensitivity, and extensive guidance and information are provided on performance descriptors, teaching and learning strategies and suggested units of work. For example, students should be able to perform ritualised actions, be involved in ritualised exchanges, contemplate a candle flame, and respond to a variety of experiences involving music, colour, lights food and tactile objects. A range of teaching strategies is offered – using visitors, artefacts, art and craft, drama and music – to engage the senses, and units of work are provided on festivals, light and journeys. The emphasis on the senses, the body and ritual seems wholly appropriate in the context of this particular group of students. But given the prominence of ritual forms and the body in religion – in feasting, fasting, celebration, pilgrimage and prayer – then a similar emphasis is appropriate for all students – who are themselves bodily as well as intellectual beings. Though the syllabus is unusual in the space it devotes to teaching and learning strategies and active and experiential learning, and it does provide some worked out examples using these approaches in its examples of lessons for KS 1 – 3, there is a lingering sense that the affective realm is still, even in this syllabus, something of an add-on for the majority of students, exploited fully only with students who have a limited ability in the conceptual and analytic realm.

For each of the KS 1 – 3 the structure of the syllabus is worked through: Introduction; Hierarchy of concept development; Explanation of learning model; Knowledge, skills and understanding; Breadth of study; Units of work on each of the religions; Units of work for exploring religious and non-religious experience. So also at KS4 with the content and examples being replaced by recommendations on GCSE. Following the introduction to post 16 a series of interesting and topical though not obviously structurally related topics are suggested, including: Contemporary belief systems, Meditation, Liberation Theology, Gender and Religion and Medical Ethics.

Within the separate Primary and Secondary handbooks there is very useful detailed guidance accompanied by multiple examples to enable teachers to turn the syllabus' learning model and structure into schemes of work.

In the appendices there is further guidance on using level descriptors, help and forms for teacher self-assessment, a method for explaining the syllabus methodology to students, and assistance for teachers and departments to assess their progress on implementing the syllabus.

The work involved in creating this tour-de-force of guidance, content and example has been enormous. Though some of the lesson plans, produced in the LEA template, feel over-detailed, trying to cover every possible eventuality and context, the result of all this work is a syllabus of thought-through theory that has been worked up by experienced practitioners into sound contemporary advice. Living Difference sits well within the lineage of former Hampshire syllabuses and will make a significant impact on the RE landscape well beyond Hampshire, Portsmouth and Southampton.

Unfortunately the LEAs have decided not to make the syllabus available on-line but the CDs can be purchased at clive.erricker@btopenworld.com

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