

Use of images to develop creative thinking in RE

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BPRS S1070: Level 1 Report

a) What was my original focus and research question?

At the end of February 2002, when I submitted my application, my aims were to look at the ways photographs and photography could be used in RE classes to stimulate creative thinking. I wanted students to create their own photographs, which would talk about their knowledge and understanding of religion (Attainment Target 1: learning about religions). I hoped that through discussion and listening to the responses of others, students would also reflect and respond to the stimulus within the photograph, and thus work on Attainment Target 2: learning from religions.

b) What research methods did I use to answer this question?

Students gathered their own evidence by taking photographs, and then talking about them, prompted by me to explore the religious "big concepts" at greater depth. This was also facilitated by other students' comments and questions.

Whole classes were given cameras each, and other classes not involved in the project at all. For ethical reasons, I did not want to select some students to have disposable cameras and others not.

Students filled in a questionnaire (attached) about each photograph they had taken.

c) How useful were these and what did you learn from this experience?

Not all cameras were handed back; therefore there was some wastage of resources. I decided that it was necessary for each student to be given his or her own disposable camera. They worked just as well when they had a camera in a pair, or took a few photographs and then handed on the camera to another person. In fact, having a camera on their own with 36 pictures on it slowed the process down, as students naturally felt obliged to use up the whole film. Given the exact nature of the task, this was demanding. Students were told, for example, to take pictures of religious activity in their community, or examples of "awe", or expressions of natural theology (i.e. evidence that could be cited by someone who believed God was the creator and designer of the universe).

The questionnaire was a useful basis for discussion, and teaching.

I also learnt that students felt valued in that the RE Department was investing in them by giving them a disposable camera.

d) My key findings were very positive. The questionnaire reveals that some students felt they had grown in their own spirituality, especially in terms of

their own mortality. Others realised the significance religion has in people's lives. Some appreciated the power of images, and planned to use them in their coursework, for example. They also had immediate experience of how captions can anchor meaning, and were able to manipulate these. These findings are discussed in more detail in my report that follows.

- e) A Science teacher adopted this idea, and he asked students to take photographs of pollution around the school site. Students had to think laterally to find examples. It is a simple idea, which is relatively cheap, but still has a certain excitement attached to it. It is very empowering for students as they are in control of the camera and the photographs they choose to take. It is therefore a powerful weapon in the student voice armoury.
- f) I would like to share this idea with my own school staff at a training day in 2004, as I believe it is widely applicable to all sections of the school community.

I would also like to share this with other RE teachers in Cambridgeshire, and have already received an invitation from the RE Advisor, Sarah Smalley, to do so. This would focus specifically on linking the project to the Cambridgeshire Agreed Syllabus, QCA schemes of work and Attainment Targets 1 and 2.

I have already shared the process of this research with colleagues at the Department of Education, Cambridge University, and would like to work under the direction of my supervisor Kristine Black-Hawkins for ways to disseminate this project. For example, this project has a contribution to make to student voice initiatives at every key stage.

I would like to incorporate ICT into this project by encouraging students to use a digital camera that would allow them even greater control over their own image, so that they are able to mould the image for the purpose to inform others in the class as to its teaching point. (National Curriculum ICT at KS3: interpret information and to reorganize and present it in a variety of forms that are fit for purpose).

I would also be interested in using this project as a way to deliver aspects of the KS3 Strategy in RE (as a Foundation Subject). Before I could advise others on this, however, I would need time (and therefore money) to explore these possibilities myself.

I am sub editor for RE Today, the professional magazine which goes out three times a year. I would therefore have a platform to publish my research within the organization of Christian Education Movement.

- g) Timeline: The project extended over the 2002-3 academic years and has been written up in the Autumn term.
- h) Budget: The projected costs were for mentoring, production and printing costs of the images along with general materials expenses. The DfES allocation of £1800 was used in full.

S1070 Level 3 Report

What's it like to be a Believer?

One of the challenges for RE is to ask students to enter into a faith, perhaps other than their own if they belong to one; or perhaps from a position of atheism or agnosticism. Students also cling to indifference and intolerance. At the same time, RE must not attempt to convert or proselytise. However, there is a responsibility to ask ourselves and our students to think about how best to live, and what is important and relevant for us so that we can build authentic lives. Ideas of this magnitude, or KS3 National Strategy's "big concepts" cannot not inherited or imposed but only sought through example and self-discovery. A photographic snapshot asks the student to capture for a fleeting second something of this reality. By asking students to take photographs of their perception of what the community around them looked like from a believer's point of view, they began to engage in an exploration of what it is like to believe, either from their own experience (Susan, photographs 2 and 3), or empathetically (Miranda, photograph 12) and (Kevin, photograph 1).

I wanted to find out whether I could engage students' interest in a difficult and perhaps 'uncool' subject by giving them disposable cameras. I wanted to raise the status of the subject in the school and amongst parents and hoped that the photography project would have a positive ripple effect.

I chose examination groups because they were smaller than KS3 groups, which had approximately 30 as opposed to 10 students in each lesson. I did not want to select some students and not others, as I didn't want to favour some students over others. I also wanted there to be a clear advantage of being in an examination group and thus I used a 'pull factor' to entice students to opt for Religious Studies GCSE or A Level.

The method

Due to the pressures on my time, I wanted students to conduct the research themselves i.e. take their photographs and analyse them, leaving me with only a questionnaire to design, some allocated time in class for discussion, and the write up.

This meant that the students had to do the thinking in terms of what to take photographs of, which photograph to choose, and how to respond to it themselves and then again, through the comments of their peers. This was an important part of their independent learning.

Sometimes students responded superficially to their photographs but with prompting, they were able to explore both what the image meant in terms of the curriculum, but also what it meant to them personally. This was an important aspect of developing their sense of self and their priorities. There is a body of knowledge about the value of photography in psychotherapy in terms of building up a sense of identity and students certainly recognized when a photograph had personal significance for them. *"The camera is an instrument that teaches people how to see without a camera."*

Dorothea Lange. Taking a photograph forces someone into the present, focusing their thinking on the now. It busies the hands and stills the heart. *"Once you really commence to see things, then you really commence to feel things."* Edward J. Steichen. Looking at photographs can focus on what they are *about* emotionally, in addition to what they are *of* visually. Photographs are "visual constructions of reality", and show the photographer, literally, "how it looks for me".

Visual Literacy

Some class work had already been done on visual literacy. Using images from the Internet, newspapers, books as well as my own photographs, we had looked at the role of title and caption to anchor meaning. For example, I gave students a photograph without a caption and asked them to come up with possible captions for it. We then compared these with the newspaper's choice of meaning. It was apparent a photograph could mean a variety of things, according to the viewer's subjective reality. What is included and what is cropped, where it is displayed and surrounded by which words will govern the way the image is 'read'. The importance of students taking their own photographs, therefore, and being responsible for the meaning attached to the image cannot be underestimated. By filling in the questionnaire students were empowered to own the image.

<http://www.oxfam.org.uk/coolplanet/teachers/photopps/abphopp.htm>

Is a site devoted to using photographs in the classroom with KS1 to KS4. It covers the following areas:

[Why use photographs?](#)

[Choosing and using photographs](#)

[How do children respond to and 'read' photos?](#)

[Checklist for use of photos in the classroom](#)

[Developing key skills](#)

What is a 'religious' photograph?

I did not give students examples of the type of photograph I was looking for, as this would defeat the object of the research which was to ask students to think for themselves what constituted 'religion in the community', 'religious activity' or 'religious experience'. I felt that if they had preconceived ideas of what was required, they would not look in an original and individual way. Of course, we all carry a bank of images, symbols and expectations that would have shaped their choices.

For example, when this idea was applied to a Science class the teacher asked the students to find an image to illustrate 'pollution'. When I interviewed the student later about how the process had gone, he said, "I had to think where I could find pollution around the school. In the end I took a photograph of a car exhaust (while the engine was running) and then another of the stains on the tarmac from the exhaust." The key words here, of course, are "*I had to think...*" If the teacher had supplied the students with the visual prompts, the thinking would not have been necessary.

Despite the proliferation of images around us, there is an argument that suggests that we are now less visually literate than our ancestors. "Language is the great achievement of evolution - an essential ingredient in what makes human beings unique...in Western culture, language is king."¹ Children think in images before they verbalize, but religions rely on imagery that can cut across cultural, racial and linguistic divides. Too heavy an emphasis on language and left hemisphere brain activity can cull the ability to think in images and wordless experiences, such as spiritual experiences or visions that are

¹ Robertson, I, 2002, *The Mind's Eye*, Bantam Press

typically right brain type activities. However, verbal instructions such as those given by the science teacher can prompt images. Of course, both left and right side of the brain are only half the story, and what this exercise attempted to do was give students the opportunity to use their right side through taking the photograph and then the left side in analysing its meaning. Balance between left and right brain thinking is the aim.

Before the majority could read and write, religions communicated their truths through art, design, pictures, sounds, and scents of participatory events in corporate worship, which appeal to the right side of the brain. All religions have sacred texts, but not the expectation that all followers will be able to read them. Indeed, since power lies in the hands of those who can handle such texts because they can act as mediators for them and interpreters of them for the followers, sacred texts are often kept at a distance from followers. The Torah may be kept in scrolls, touched only with a yod and read only by those who have been suitably initiated. The Qur'an requires knowledge of Arabic, and the Bible only became available to the people since the advent of the printing press in this country. John Damascene described icons and images as "the Bible of the illiterate."

Sacred stories, myths and legends of saints and founders, visions, miracles and morality, have always been communicated through image, drama and symbol. "...certain parts of the church ritual were expanded in action, and especially at the great religious festivals of Christmas and Easter attempts were made to exhibit vividly before the faithful what the service was intended to commemorate. The Wise Men from the East, who had been guided by a miraculous star, worshipped and presented their gifts before the cradle of the Divine babe; the Virgin Mother was represented by a girl with a child in her arms; the Resurrection was suggested by a priest rising from a mimic sepulchre. Later the action was extended, and dialogues were added. These were, of course, in Latin, the universal language of the Church...(this) was usurped by a Mystery in French verse. Banners hung above the fretted arches; the odour of incense filled the air; tapers shone brightly in the dim light from storied and diversely-coloured windows; elaborate processions wound their way through the aisle to the strains of solemn music; the figures of the priest-players stood out in clear relief against the splendour of the altar, as, facing thousands of rapt spectators, they gravely declaimed, with appropriate gestures, the dialogue intended to set forth the events which led up to the Crucifixion."² The visual experience of being in a church must have been an intense magical experience for medieval people in this country. Through story, the images had content overlaid with superstition; accessing the right hand brain. This is the experience of believers in every faith, culture and age. Can we ask students to study religion and not have a sense of this? RE tends to be dominated by a learning about religions or Attainment Target 1 approach rather than learning from religions (AT2). However, religion differs from science in that it does not depend on logic for its meaning. It is more concerned with things that are non-empirical and experiential. The multi-sensory approach described above is not confined to medieval Christianity; it is replicated everyday in, for example, Hindu shrines and Greek Orthodox services. Interestingly, since the collapse of the Established Church in the UK the need has simply been diversified into "new age" type practices e.g. scented candles, meditation, and the growth of holistic medicine.

² Bates, A, 1906, *The Drama: Its History, Literature and Influence on Civilization*, vol. 7, London: Historical Publishing Company

"I have taken a religious work of art to mean one that draws the onlooker, as well as the artist, to contemplate *something* which is beyond the work of art itself, *something* which many people call God."³ Susan is a member of a strict fundamentalist Christian group, immersed in its practices. It is interesting to note that the and bread rolls plastic cups translate easily for Susan into bread and wine and express the miracle of transubstantiation for her, because she is literate in the symbolism of her faith. This binds her to her religious group and breaks down the walls of individual consciousness in a way that the logic of language cannot. It reduces her sense of alienation within a culture where the majority are more likely to recognize the imagery of MacDonald's arch than the cross. Symbols are not like signs, which have fixed meanings. Symbols are not time bound; they flourish and die. Religious images, however, have a wealth of sophisticated symbolism and story attached to them. These are truths as long as they have believers to adhere to them. In order for students to understand religion, I felt it was necessary for them to move away from language-logic to imagery-intuition, from verbalization to visualization, because religions have wordless visions and experiences at their base. Miracles are religious experiences and tend to be visual, as well as verbal, life-changing events. These are later explained and classified in words. Did Moses' burning bush speak to him in words, or was that his inner understanding of his encounter with the Divine in Exodus 3? It is an indication of our obsession with rationalization and explanation that St Paul's conversion is now considered a possible epileptic fit⁴.

I wanted students to search in images and rediscover visual symbolism in order to appreciate the art prompted by religious and spiritual experience, because

"There's a cool web of language winds us in,
Retreat from too much joy or too much fear:
We grow sea-green at last and coldly die
In brininess and volubility".⁵

Religious imagery allows students access to qualities of consciousness that are not available to the left side of the brain, such as transcendence, a sense of peace and timelessness. Although none of the students were Buddhist, taking photographs and spending time in front of an image of a meditating Buddha calmed them all. Kevin, Samantha and Miranda took photographs 1,6, and 13 of Canal Street Buddhist temple, New York. The colours, light and smell of incense encouraged them to let their minds wander.

The negative side is that religious imagery transcends reason and therefore makes dialogue between religions very difficult. Translating the symbolism of bread and wine into words to someone who is not a Christian could make the act of worship appear to be one of cannibalism. A symbolic image is one with associations that can bring out a superior reality.

There is a tension within religions regarding images. Within the Judaeo-Christian community, this dates back to the commandment: 'Thou shalt not make any graven images.' Islamic art has no tradition of figurative art. "To whom then will you liken

³ Day, M.,1894, *Modern Art in Christian Churches*, London, Mobray

⁴ God on the Brain, Horizon programme, BBC 2.

⁵ The Cool Web, poem by Robert Graves

God?" (Isaiah 40: 28) St. John of Damascus wrote "In former times (i.e. B.C.) God, who is without form and body, could never be depicted. But now when God is seen in flesh..." He sees a differentiation between the pre-Christian era and the New Testament, which overrode the Old Testament. In fact Jesus uses visual imagery a great deal in his teaching. He mentions the mustard seed, the sower, the net, lilies of the field, the ravens and sparrows for example to illuminate his message. When the blind receive their sight, it is not only in the literal sense; his followers are told to 'watch and pray' i.e. look around, observe and interpret the signs of the times.

Religious art is often seen as inspired by God, 'the Artist' of humans, the earth, and the universe. "...it is not you who make God, but rather God who makes you..." (St Irenaeus of Lyons). This philosophy allows art to be used in worship as "God created the arts in order that life might be held together by them, so that we should not separate ourselves from spiritual things." (St John Chrysostom). The C20 potter Barbara Hepworth wrote "All true works of art are an act of praise. It is an acknowledgement of the external power which enables man to create...visions which all share. A perception of the holiness of life and the universe."

In RE we are engaged with the believing student as well as the agnostic or aesthetist student. It is not appropriate to ask a student to take a photograph of the divine, religious or spiritual. However, it is permissible to ask a student to take a photograph of what they understand others to mean by the divine, religious and spiritual...and perhaps spiral like to arrive at the same place - or somewhere poles apart.

Learning styles

There are lots of tests and information for students to analyse their preferred learning style on the web, for example at <http://snow.utoronto.ca/Learn2/mod3/index.html>. There is also plenty of analysis of teaching styles to maximize students' learning.

This research is concerned with helping visual learners. Visual learners remember best what they see--pictures, diagrams, flow charts, time lines, films, and demonstrations. In contrast, verbal learners get more out of words--written and spoken explanations. Able students may be capable of processing information presented either visually or verbally; everyone learns more when information is presented both visually and verbally, because they are able to access both the left and right sides of the brain.

In some classes very little visual information is presented: students mainly listen to 'teacher talk', and read material written on whiteboards and in textbooks and handouts. However, most people are visual learners, which means that most students do not get nearly as much as they would if more visual presentation were used in class. Diagrams, sketches, schematics, photographs, flow charts, or any other visual representation of course material that is predominantly verbal helps visual learners.

Beyond Inclusion⁶: Participation

"Tell me and I'll forget
Show me and I'll remember
Involve me and I'll understand".

Inclusion is the buzzword in education these days. However, one step beyond this is the notion that students should be enabled to participate in their learning. Taking photographs and then writing about them meant that students felt valued and involved. The low-tech nature of a disposable camera meant that I could allow students to take the project off site. This would not have been possible with more expensive equipment. A disposable camera costs about £5 and includes flash. Although this project is funded by the DfES, it would be manageable to run under a capitation budget with students sharing a camera on a rota basis. Some cameras were not returned, but the curiosity factor meant that the majority were. In research, there is always a non-return issue to be factored in, whether it is questionnaires or in this case, cameras. I did write to parents to explain I was giving their child a disposable camera to be used to support their RE lessons.⁷ Students, like adults, are much more interested in their own photographs than other people's. This is why I moved on from analysing and deconstructing photographs I had taken with students, or those culled from books and the media. They were much more "engaged" with their own creations.

The questionnaire

I asked students to complete the questionnaire in response to a photograph they had taken, and chosen to focus on. Out of their roll of film, I asked them to choose one or two photos that they felt they could discuss with other students in the class and which was successful in their opinion in terms of illustrating an aspect of their syllabus, religious knowledge and understanding, or own spirituality.

Some students were not sure which picture to choose. They knew that the picture that spoke most valuably to them was not necessarily the best picture in terms of technical lighting or composition. In these cases, I always advised them to go for the picture that had the most to say, rather than the most technically correct one. This discussion in itself was valuable. For example, Martha ("A Family going to a church. Family church outing." Photograph 5) was not sure whether to choose a picture of a church *without* people walking through the graveyard, or *with* the people. Both photos were taken within minutes of each other). I suggested we chose the one with people because it had vitality. However, she could have chosen the photo with an empty graveyard (*without* the family) to make a point about deserted churches in our secular age!

The questionnaire is reproduced in the appendix.

"Visual images communicate. They represent a reality existing elsewhere. Reading meaning into such images, decoding the messages they carry, is a cultural act - a social

⁶ Thank you to Kristine Black-Hawkins, Dept of Education at Cambridge University, for this insight.

⁷ See Appendix

process".⁸ In class, students filled out their questionnaire on their chosen photograph. We talked about the photograph as the student filled in the answers. There was opportunity for cross talk, comment, story telling, searching for references in the Bible, and laughter whilst we did this.

I would like to pull out some thoughts on each question across the group, and look at some individual responses to the photographs.

1. What does your picture show? What title would you give it and why?

This asked for a basic description of the theme represented/specific event. It asked students to anchor the meaning to their photograph by labelling it. Students understood the relationship between their chosen title and the event well, because they were in control of it there was no conflict in meaning or confusion.

"My picture shows Riverside Gospel Church in New York. I would give it the same title." (Samantha, photograph 6)

"Buddha with fruit (Canal Street, New York)". (Kevin, photograph 1) Some students attached meaning to their images through the title quite deliberately. They were able to extend the identity of the image with their own meanings. For example: "A statue of Mary and Jesus. Jesus has died, because you can see the cuts from the crucifixion. I would call this photo 'The Shiny Heart of Jesus'." (Miranda, photograph 12)

Another student wrote "A church and a graveyard. (title is) Heaven and Hell. Because these people are in heaven or hell." (Jane, photograph 9). Again,

"A gravestone. Title: The End. Because that is where we all end up sooner or later." (Nancy, photograph 11) "The Free Church. Title: The Holy Place. Because that is what it is." (Lara, photograph 10)

"It shows bread and wine, the title of this would be the blood and body of Christ".

These responses show that students took their photographs intending to convey a particular message to the viewer and themselves about their understanding of religious ideas.

2. What do these things/people mean to you?

This question was intended to encourage students to develop their Attainment Target 2, 'Learning From Religion'. It arose out of work I had done earlier with KS3 students, who had brought in a photograph, which expressed something or someone they treasured. Spiritual development is a strand of 'SMSC'.⁹ Samantha (photograph 6) wrote, "This picture means a lot to me because it reminds me of my wonderful trip to New York." Jane (photograph 9) wrote, "It shows that I will end up dead at some time and will go to Heaven and Hell too!" . "While we know, intellectually, that photographs are not 'real', do not 'tell the truth', but are specific choices, constructions, frozen moments, edited out

⁸ Prosser, J, (ed) 1999, *School Culture*, London, Paul Chapman.

⁹ Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural Development.

of time - yet we invest them with meaning."¹⁰ Photographs can be a key to opening deep discussion as the objects revealed in them easily translate into symbols, just as these gravestones became symbols of mortality and eternity. Both these responses show that students are able to build up their sense of self through reflection on the photographs. Taking photographs of an apparently neutral academic theme, in this case evidence of religious activity in the community, moved students beyond socially acceptable snaps of smiling groups at weddings, parties, days out etc. Their choices became an expression of their identity, a fact that became obvious when they compared what they had taken to others given the same task in the group.

3. Did anyone else in the class notice anything different/something else from you in your picture?

"Everything in the photograph is potentially significant, even and especially, that which has escaped the control of the photographer pointing the camera...The photographic plate is etched with experience, like the unconscious; and like the unconscious, it invites a symptomatic reading of the images that escape from it..."¹¹

This question relates to the teaching and learning activity the developed photographs stimulated. By sharing and discussing the images I was able to direct students' attention to areas of the curriculum the photograph related to, but it also opened students' eyes to other readings of the images and thus highlighted the post modernist idea that truth is relative. Often there was collective wisdom in the group that added depth to the analysis. The class observed, "The tree in the middle reflects the atmosphere as all its leaves have dropped except one" in Susan's graveyard picture. This shows that students were able to attach symbolic meaning to objects in the photograph, as they did in Martha's (photograph 5): "The light from above the church looks like God is present", and in Kevin's (photograph 1) "The light shining from his head", which has overtones of a halo.

The question also intended to move students away from the comfort zone of their own certainty and towards self-discovery. The challenge of others comments forced students either to defend the snapshot they had chosen, or acknowledge other readings of it. As Isaac Newton said, "I stand on the beach and play with pebbles while the whole ocean of truth stretches before me."

4. What do we know or what can you guess about the beliefs of the person/people in this picture?

This was a more straightforward question, which asked students to make the connection between beliefs and actions, and vice versa. Sometimes the obvious can still be striking, though. Nancy's (photograph 11) picture of a grave elicited the response "The person...is a Christian because this is a Christian graveyard", while Susan (photograph 2) noted "The people (buried) had mixed beliefs as there are different sections for people of certain beliefs."

¹⁰ Wells, L.,ed, 2003, The Photography reader, Martin, R. and Spence, J. *Photo Therapy*, London, Routledge

¹¹ I Wells, L.,ed, 2003, The Photography reader, Introduction, London, Routledge

5. Could this picture be used for propaganda of any kind?

This question intended to explore the idea that images can be used for multiple purposes, depending on context, cropping and caption. This was a question prompting exploration of the multiple readings available of one image; perhaps as many as there were viewers, to take a pluralist post-modern stance. This recognition is important in RE. "What is truth?" asks Pilate, confronted with a man who uniquely claimed to be 'The way, the truth and the life.' This question clearly links back to question 2, where students claimed the reading they wanted for themselves. Having done so, it was possible to look at alternative uses for the image. Question 10 is an echo of this question, and interestingly was "poorly answered", to use examiner speak, since it really repeated question 5 in slightly different words..

Question 5 is an important question in terms of students' general education about the nature of media manipulation. Our students live in a world that bombards us with images in order to manipulate us. With extreme sophistication our allegiance is bought. Students deserve to understand how this is done.

Some students understood how different meanings could be ascribed to one image. For example, Jane (photograph 9) wrote of the graveyard, "This could be used in a campaign against war. This could be the result (of war)." Susan (photograph 2) wrote of her graveyard, "It could influence people to have a belief of some sort, so that they would not be lonely in death." Miranda (photograph 12) noted "People of religious belief could use this as propaganda to say that it is a miracle".

6. What part of the RE course does this picture illustrate?

This question was an attempt to clearly link the photograph with RE GCSE and A Level, both for students' understanding and for my convenience in using the photograph in the future. Students answered this succinctly: "Death and the Afterlife", "Pluralism", "The Nature of Belief", "Corporate Religious Experience" and "Religious Experience and the arguments of David Hume."

7. Is there a quotation from sacred texts that could match this picture? Could it be used for worship or prayer?

This question intended to probe students and encourage them to look more deeply into the religious aspects of their photograph. Many of them searched for a Biblical quotation using a Concordance. Nancy, for example, chose "Many of those who sleep within the dust of the earth may awake." (Daniel 12) She added "It could be used at a funeral". This question has a lot of teaching potential within it. For example, I could have encouraged students to look at Buddhist scriptures to anchor the Buddhist temple photographs if it had tied in with the syllabus.

8. If you could take the photo again, what would you change?

This was more of a technical question, prompting students to think about cropping, lighting and so on.

9. How might this photograph help another student in their RE course?

This question consolidated students' own learning, by default. "It would show how much religious buildings mean to people." (Samantha, photograph 8) "They could debate whether it is a miracle that the light was shining from Jesus's heart or a coincidence." (Miranda, photograph 12) "To show...the church is very much involved in the community." (Lara, photograph 10) Some students' learning points were more personal. "This might help another student to think about the end of life and where we go after." (Nancy, photograph 11).

10. What other meanings might this photograph have?

This was an important question because it meant students had to understand how photographs can be used to mean many things, depending on caption and who the viewer is. Truth is in the eye of the beholder. Students found this question difficult, however Susan wrote, "Empty plates - eating when there are poor people in the world who do not." (Susan, photograph 2). This is quite a different interpretation from her earlier 'bread and wine' reading.

11. Has it made you think about things in a different way? Do you notice images around you more and link them to your studies?

This was quite an ambitious question. "It made me realise that are many different ways in which holiness can be expressed." (Kevin, photograph 1) "How precious life is and how we need something like religion to make our lives complete". For her second picture, "It makes me think how religion is important, something I look at something and think how it could symbolize something (else)." (Susan, photograph 3) "I have noticed more religious buildings in and around Cambridge." Her second photograph: "I appreciate and value Christian architecture a lot more." (Samantha, photograph 2) "Yes, I have learnt a lot from this exercise. I found there is a religious experience in everything!" (Martha, photograph 5) "It helped me think more carefully about the end of life and about how to use the time we are given." (Nancy, photograph 11) "In future I will include photographs in my work because they are useful and link your work to the world around us today." (Lara, photograph 10). These comments fulfil the aims of the project in that they appear to show that students have a greater appreciation of the place of religion in others' lives, as well as developing students' own spirituality and understanding of imagery.

12. Any other comments?

"It's a great photo" (Miranda, photograph 12) and "It reminds me of a Gospel service we attended here (Riverside Church, New York)." (Samantha, photograph 6)

The outcomes of the research

I realised that this was a successful method for teachers to add to their repertoire of teaching and learning activities, and that it could be replicated in other subjects.

What I did not expect to find was the 'pupil voice' aspect of the project. It became apparent that students could use their own photographs as a powerful means of self-expression.

Students also learnt about religion because they looked at places of worship, or photographed what they understood by a religious experience and symbolism. Sometimes they made comments that showed they had been prompted into thinking about their own mortality, and the significance of religion for others. (See Question 11). There is evidence of both spiritual and personal development as well as learning about religions (Attainment Target 1).

As regards to the research process, I realised that it is better to narrow down the area of interest and look at just a few students and their work in depth, than skim over the surface of a much larger enterprise. Overall, I think the project has been successful because it has been so simple and enjoyable. I feel confident in recommending the idea to other teachers simply because it is manageable in terms of time and finances. It is worth trying because

- students feel valued by being given a disposable camera
- it is a stimulating and challenging task
- it is suited to all abilities
- it promotes RE beyond the classroom into the home
- it is satisfying for students as they create something they can share

The skills the project develops the most seem to be:

- empathy: (through listening to others, and looking at the subject matter)
- visual literacy: cropping, control over content, captions

Potential developments of the research

In light of the Government's Key Stage 3 Strategy for Foundation subjects, I would like to see how the ideas outlined above would fit into the new framework. This would be helpful to other RE teachers, and be a way in to using the new terminology with concrete examples.

I would also like to teach students how to use a digital camera, which allows for instant editing on location. It also allows for greater manipulation on computer. Would this greater flexibility encourage greater analysis and promote discussion of religious concepts?

Appendix:

1. Letter to Parents

Dear Parents/Carers,

As part of a Government funded research project with Cambridge University's School of Education, I am looking at the role of photographs in the classroom. This looks at the idea that using and taking their own photographs encourages children to take an interest in the topic being taught. My research findings will be published in due course and be available for all to read. Your child will not be named or identified in any way, beyond gender and Year group. (Names will be changed in the final report).

I would like to give your child a disposable camera for them to take photographs of religious activity in the community/or a more specific task suited to their coursework. When the film is finished, they should return the camera to me for developing. We will then be able to discuss their findings in class.

I would appreciate your support in ensuring that your child takes appropriate photographs, which can be used in class to support their Religious Education, or raise marks in the coursework.

Please ring me at school or email me at Diana_wilson65@ hotmail.com should you have any queries.

I would be grateful if you could return the slip below, to show that you are happy for your child to be issued with a disposable camera.

Yours faithfully,

Diana Wilson
Head of RE Dept.

I am happy for my child to be given a disposable camera, which I will encourage them to use responsibly and only for the task set and return to Mrs. Wilson for developing.

Name of pupil.....Form.....

Date.....Signed.....