ENHANCING RE USING ICT

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There is no doubt that we are entering a new world in school, one that the business and academic world has come through over the last few years. In most businesses, universities and retail establishments computers and technology are part and parcel of the working environment, not something that people use in a special way at a special time but something that is an integral part of their working environment.

This is not yet the case for schools, though some schools are beginning to use ICT in this way, and certainly not the place for most RE classroom though again it is for some. There are, however, a whole range of ways in which technology can become an integral part of the teaching and learning of Religious Education. It is important, at the beginning of this piece, to stress that it is the improvement of the Religious Education that is the key aim not the enahancment of the use of the hardware or software though this may be an added bonus that come to both teacher and pupils.

So, in this mini-essay I am going to cover a few ways in which you might use the existing and emergent technologies in your RE teaching and learning. This may be a personal use by the teacher or the student or a use by the teacher or the student in the RE classroom, or a use between teachers and/or students outside of the classroom. This is not a comprehensive list but a stimulus to start you thinking. For more ideas on using ICT in the classroom see www.mmiweb.org.uk

I will begin with a little of the background of the development of ICT in education in general and then in RE, then the bulk of this essay will be on practical uses in the classroom and beyond, and finish with a list of "ten tips" for the classroom.

A) Background

There has been a huge investment in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) over the last few years into schools in the UK, amounting to about £1.8 billion in the years 1998-2004 and serious questions need to be asked about how effective this use of money is in the **raising of achievement in the subject** as well as the development in skills in ICT. A number of important projects have looked at the effectiveness of ICT [IMPACT1, IMPACT2, Pathfinders, SAND, Young People and ICT, Testbed, Computers for Teachers, Passey, Somekh] however none these studies mentioned the use of ICT in Religious Education in anything other than passing terms, and some not at all. Overall, the weight of evidence from the big studies mentioned above suggests that ICT provision and pupil and teacher use of ICT do have a positive impact on pupil attainment though there is no definitive causal link, and a key aspect is often the "embeddedness" of the ICT in both pedagogy, methodology and practice. There are clear messages that ICT does motivate pupils by engaging pupils directly; what is unclear is how significant this "novelty factor" is, how this should be managed in the classroom and whether other novelty factors that could be used would have the same impact. This should also be considered in light of the research into learning styles and intelligences and how ICT may offer an engagement with learning styles other than visual and auditory which tend to dominate in many RE classrooms.

What is key from the research is that it is not just the arrival of the "boxes" that causes either motivation or attainment, it is the use to which the teacher puts the ICT in the structure of teaching and learning, as Cox (2003) points out:

> *"There is a strong relationship between the ways in which ICT has been used and the attainment outcomes. This suggests that the crucial component in the use of ICT within education is the teacher and their pedagogical approaches ... insufficient understanding of the scope of an ICT resource leads to inappropriate or superficial uses."*

What is also clear is that there is no expectation from the research that ICT should impact in all subjects in the same way. From the report "The big picture":

> "It is unlikely, even with imaginative and effective use, that ICT can make the same contribution in every subject at every age."

A series of small studies and research into the use of ICT in **teaching and learning** in Religious Education have been conducted in the last couple of years ass part of the Becta/DfES "embedding ICT" agenda (Hopkins, 2004; Rivett and Hopkins, 2005) and a needs analysis of the use of ICT in RE (Hopkins, 2003) was very encouraging about the ways in which RE teachers are using ICT in the preparation of materials for the classroom and to enhance and develop their won subject knowledge. The survey also showed that whilst teachers were keen to use ICT in the classroom there were four mains reasons given why they did not, time, access to the ICT, their own skills and opportunities for using ICT that enhanced the teaching and learning of the RE.

Some tentative conclusions could be drawn about attainment, motivation and learning from these studies and these have given rise to the practical ideas outlined below.

B) Ways to use ICT to enhance Religious Education

1.   Looking for the 'truth'

The world wide web (WWW) gives access a wide variety of religious experience, artefacts and information that is not readily available in all RE classrooms and would be difficult or expensive to develop. Whilst search engines such as Google© or Altavista© are effective a better place to start is The RE Site's search engine (part of RE Online)(www.theresite.org.uk/allre/) and use their search engine. When using the internet it is important to be aware that there are few of the checks and balances that you will find in printed materials so developing a set of 'trusted' sites is important, thought these may be different for yourself and the students and for different groups of students (see bookmarks below).

Teaching idea: Webquests

Develop a webquest with your students. This can be quite complex and involve solving puzzles or problem solving a quite simple idea in which your pupils visit a series of website in order to find information. You should use the variety of resources that the web has to offer and not just ask students to find text but images, text, video and audio can all be built into the material that they need to find.

The complexity of the questions will depend on the ability and age of the students. For an idea on a webquest visit the one on the Redbridge LEA website at:
http://www.woodford.redbridge.sch.uk/rs/festbridge/

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2.   Making multimedia lessons

There is a variety of digital equipment that can add hugely to the teaching and learning in the RE classroom. It is worth thinking of two sorts of digital equipment that can be used to enhance the teaching of RE. Both digital still and digital video aid students in developing their visual literacy. Much of the ways in which students are expected to demonstrate their ability is tied to the way in which they can handle words and text and yet visual and spoken materials forms the majority of the communication tools of their "normal" existence. Much work is currently being done on the impact of learning styles on achievement and the development of visual literacy tends to appear to all sorts of learners.

(A) Digital Stills: The digital stills camera offers huge practical advantages for the teaching in terms of cost and ease of use, no film, no developing costs and no limits to the number of photographs that can be taken.

Teaching Idea: Digital storytelling

Students can either find a series of images for themselves, or the teacher can provide a set of images. These can then be used in a presentation package (such as PowerPoint) or in a simple Word Processing package to develop a story based around these images and text. The images could be presented in a particular order and the students could be asked to develop a story based on the images or the students could arrange the images themselves and then tell this story.

Teaching Idea: On visits

When visiting a place of worship take a camera for every 4/5 students. Check with the place of worship first about permissions to take photos (they will often allow this but not during services). Allow the students to take as many pictures as they wish and then in their group then need to select the best 5-10 images to use as a presentation on the place of worship. This could be AT1 or AT2 based (e.g. explain how symbols are used in the place or worship, or reflect on how the building challenged your ideas about religion)

There are a number of ways that you can these use these images once they are back in the classroom. One way is to ash each student / group to choose an images for a 'show and tell' this could incorporate both explaining the use and function of the object as well as a reflective element on either concrete or symbolic items in the building. Another way of using the images is to ask the students to design a leaflet explaining to a visitor to the place of worship how the furniture, symbols and layout of the building reflects the believes of the worshippers. If you can get a member of the congregation to judge the outcomes.

(B) Digital Video: Digital video gives pupils the opportunity to present their own ideas and understanding in a medium which many students will feel comfortable, the medium of film. See the example below on Mimicking the media for a further example of using digital video.

Teaching Idea: Psalms

Students should look to create their own versions of the psalms, having first studied a Psalm and discussed its meaning and content, these can be performed in a variety of ways allowing students to explore the ideas and concepts explored in the psalm through a medium with which they are comfortable. The psalms cover a huge range of emotions, responses and action and these could be used 'as is' or relation to other poetic, musical or dramatic works. These can include movement, drama, dance, music [it should be emphasised that the Psalms were songs] and these can be videoed. This allows the teacher, and the students, to have a record of their work – this can then be used for teacher or peer-assessment.

Teaching Idea: Video diaries

If a picture paints a thousand words then a video must paint a million. Lend a volunteer student a video camera in order to make a short video about how religion is important to them and their family. This can be used as either a class resource or as part of a presentation on belief. It may well be that pupils have access to video / stills cameras themselves not least via their mobiles most of which will have still facility and many of which will have video adequate for playback on the computer.

What do I need to do?

Check out what digital hardware exists in your school, and see what the procedures there are for booking this. Explore the cost of buying cameras for your department.

You need to be able to import images from your camera to your computer and also how to insert images into a publishing or presentation package. For more help in doing this see
www.mmiweb.org.uk/tutorials.html

In order to use digital video you, and your students, will need to know how to use a video editing package such as ©iMovie or ©Windows Media Player. For more help in doing this see
www.mmiweb.org.uk/tutorials.html

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3.   **Exploring the authentic voice**

It can be very difficult for pupils to see how religion is seen by young people of their own age. In 1997 a large number of young people across the UK were asked questions about their beliefs and religious experience. About 7,000 of these were inputted into a database that pupils can access on-line. It would be impossible to use this incredible dataset without the search abilities of the computer. Questioning this dataset allows pupils wonderful opportunities to pose questions about religious belief.

One of the most exciting things about this data is that it is authentic which means, in some cases, that, objectively, it is wrong. In one record a young girl who professes to be a Buddhist says that there is 'no life after death'. This is a misunderstanding or an ignorance of Buddhist teaching but it gives an important insight – that people who profess a religious belief do not, or need to be, experts in that belief.

This resource allows pupils to explore the ideas of ethnographic research as part of their RE, and also to respond to the statements contained in the resource.

4. Responding to a story or a stimulus

Developing a newspaper or a magazine cover to illustrate or explain learning in RE is now a new idea but the technology allows this to happen in a much more effective and efficient way. So often when using such methodologies in the RE classroom much time is lost in the superficialities of the materials and not on the content, where the good RE should lie. The use of newspaper or magazine proformas can be a great help as can a picture, text, image or graphics banks which the students will need to select the most fit for purpose and import them into their own presentations. Students are not limited to 'flat' materials as video and sound can also be imported into their work for a real 'Harry Potter' feel to a newspaper, or to a presentation.

Sound is not well used in RE as a medium for teaching and learning. One of the functions of PowerPoint that is very powerful is the 'Record Narration' function. This allows you to set up a PowerPoint of images, text or graphics and add a narration over the top of this thus capturing work from those students who are willing to talk but less willing to write.

5.   **Mimicking the media**

Students will spend a large amount of their time in front of Televisions. There are a number of ways in which we can use technology to allow pupils to develop their knowledge and skills in RE by preparing and presenting materials in a way that reflects the world in which they live. Many religious groups themselves are grappling with the dichotomy between the way that their religious services present 'truths' to the way that the secular world presents 'truth'.

Much of the news media works to present ideas in a short item often 3-5 minutes. This can be a very powerful of getting pupils to select the vital and relevant information, to present this in a clear and precise way and offer their own perspective. Vital preparation for examinations and for life outside of school.

Teaching Idea: Making a news broadcast

Chose a topic from your syllabus that pupils can investigate but rather than getting pupils to write up their researches form them into "news teams" of about 8 pupils and get them to prepare a 3-5 minute news report on this which can be videoed and presented to the class. This could include some or all of the elements of "real" news broadcasts: interviews, stills, data, graphics, voxpops and voice overs.

Teaching Idea: Advertise

If religion believes it has something to say to the world then it should look at the mechanisms of the world. Get students to design an advert to "sell" a religion to non-believers. Develop a storyboard and then construct and film your advert.

Teaching Idea: Chat Show

The medium of the chat show is very pertinent to the methodology used in many RE classrooms. Using video or audio recording to capture the conversation this setting up of a host (you as teacher) guests and the audience question to develop personas, idea or viewpoints.

6. Seeing the big picture

Research into the use of technology in the classroom have shown that there is one piece of hardware that has immediate effect on teaching and learning. This is the video projector or large screen. The cost of these has fallen dramatically in the last few years and a video projector and laptop can now be bought for about £1500.

As well as a laptop a video/DVD player can be hooked up to a video and rather than having 30 students trying to see a 60cm television screen you can project onto a 180cm whiteboard or screen (it is worth getting a separate pull down screen for watching video as whiteboard are hard to keep clean). As well as the screen invest in a reasonable set of speakers connected to the laptop for playback of DVD.

What do I need to do?

As well as video and DVD you can use your projector to show materials from your laptop or desktop computer. You should develop a resource bank of materials linked to lessons or topics. These could include text, stills, video, graphics, animations. You will need to spend time on-line looking for such resource and be aware of the copyright limitations. Or you can purchase resources that can be used in lessons.

7. 24/7 learning

We live more and more in a 24/7 world and all schools are charged by the year 2008 to provide a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) or a Learning Platform so that pupils will have access to teaching and learning resources when they are out of your classroom and/or out of the school. Some of the aspects that you should be exploring (as part of a while school development) are:

E-Portfolios: As you embrace technology and allow pupils to present work in non-textual ways students will be developing a portfolio of work that is electronic in nature. This will need to be stored and every student will be given an amount of storage space. This work will then be available to both their teacher and also to others who they give access to.

Message boards: Students in HE are used to message boards and systems such as First Class or Blackboard, and many of your students will be members of chat rooms, or run blogs. Message boards allow students to "chat" asynchronously and develop thoughts and ideas, as well as communicate with their teachers and colleagues and share resources, work and files.

Collaboration: The development of e-portfolios and message boards mean that collaboration is easier. As RE teachers often use group work in class this gives a platform for developing group work out of class. This does not have to be limited to pupils in one class, one school or one country and the possibility for academic buddying, inter-school and international projects is huge. Can you team up with students in another school or country?

Resource bank: As you develop resources for your teaching it may well be that pupils are also developing resources. A Virtual Learning Environment or Learning Platform, means that you can make these resources, text, graphics, image, video, audio and websites available for students to use outside the classroom.

A few website to have a look at:

www.moodle.org
www.blogger.com
www.flikr.com

8. Catch it while you can: Assessment and Recording

Much of the work in RE involves discursive work (questions and answering, discussion, debate, drama, presentations, model-making, drawing, painting) the danger is that much of the thought, ideas and creative product from such lessons is not capture in order to demonstrate the achievement and attainment of pupils. You could be capturing much of this for both assessment and recording purposes.

As seen above videoing presentations or drama allows this to be used in teacher or per assessment in a much more objective manner as the video allows you listen or watch again. Use a digital camera to record a brainstorm as it develops (give the camera to a student at the front of the class) this can then be used as a plenary or as the starter for another lesson. Capture debate, discussion as stimulus and a record for students. These can then be placed onto your VLE, or made available as podcasts.

E-mail or SMS messaging (texting) can also be an excellent way of communicating with students> why not send homework or coursework via a text or an e-mail for those who have the capacity? Think about other ways that you might use these technologies to communicate with students.

9. Communication: Talking the talk

A central message in Religious Education is communication, the importance of how we talk to each other, how we talk to people of faith, how we talk to religious leaders and other 'experts'. There are a number of possible ways of developing this communication in the electronic arena. All organisations now have email contacts and students should be encouraged to contact people outside of the classroom (especially important for coursework students). Message boards (see the VLE example) can also be good ways of communicating.

Any electronic contact is either in real time (synchronous – e.g. Chat rooms) or in delayed time (asynchronous – e.g. e-mail, message boards, SMS messaging). Both of these can be used to develop teaching and learning in Religious Education.

Teaching Idea: Virtual hot-seatting

It can often be difficult to get a visitor into school as finding the time or the right person to come to school. So why not ask a person to be a 'virtual guest' for a week or two. This person can be willing to either answer e-mails or even better answer questions onto a message board (as in this way their answers are available to the whole group to see). You RE group then has a couple of weeks to think of questions (which you could work on in the classroom) of the person.

Teaching Idea: E-Mail communication

Look for another school that could take part in a project with your students. This might be on belief, on their own opinion or ideas about a religious theme or concept (e.g. how did the universe start) or a collaborative piece of research. This does not have to be a local school but could be anywhere in the country, or indeed, anywhere in the world. Why not collaborate with the languages department and work with a school in Germany or Spain to talk about important issues of the day?

Conclusion

The use of ICT can enhance the teaching and learning of Religious Education and should be a tool for **both** the teacher and the student. It is not just about searching the web and giving PowerPoints but allowing creative ways for students to demonstrate, and teachers to capture achievement in, and outside, the RE classroom. Many households will have access to technology so think of ways you can allow them to use this to produce evidence in RE – whilst being aware of the digital divide for those that do not.

Good use of ICT can enliven teaching and change patterns of learning allowing more access for the variety of teaching and learning styles and student's intelligences. Have fun and using a message board such as the Teacher's Resource Exchange (www.tre.ngfl.gov.uk) share some of these ideas.

C) Key principles for using ICT in RE

The following came from a seminar of expert users on RE and ICT:

1. When using ICT start with the Religious Education learning objectives and outcomes and be certain of what you want to achieve in RE terms.

2. Make sure that you are aware of the ICT skills that are needed and that the pupils have these and you have both these and sufficient 'troubleshooting' skills.

3. Make sure that you have a fall back plan if the technology fails.

4. Be aware of the learning styles that are being employed when using the ICT. Make sure that you offer something for a variety of learning styles and a variety of teaching methodologies.

5. Motivation should be **a** reason for using ICT but not **the** reason.

6. ICT should be used to access resources that are enhanced by the medium. These may include diversity, personal viewpoints, authentic voice and multi-media.

7. ICT should encourage **learning from** as well as **learning about** religions and should provide opportunities for reflection on their own faiths and beliefs.

8. ICT should encourage discussion and collaboration, should be participative and interactive.

9. Be aware of the amount of effort that teaching and learning with ICT may involve – consider if this is the best way to teach this part of the curriculum.

10. Use ICT to support yourself – become part of the wider community of practice.

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