

Rites of Passage

Bar Mitzvas, weddings and funerals: How a group of Year 9 students used digital media to create a teaching and learning resource about the stages of life.



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Emma Teasdale, a religious education teacher at Ashton Park School in Bristol, was working with a Year 9 RE class on a unit on rites of passage. She has found that students traditionally find it difficult to access this material.



“The subject we’re looking at and the reason why people go through these rites of passage is quite alien to them.”

RE teacher

She therefore wanted to use technology to help students engage with the topic by asking them to choose between different media to create a number of communication pieces about different rites of passage. She then planned to use these as teaching resources for future classes.

“So I’ll be saying ‘through your learning, you’re going to be helping other students with their learning’... So what I’d be looking for is for them to actually create resources... And I need them to be useable. And that means it’s purposeful, it gives them a goal, it’s for real people.”

RE teacher

This unit of work took place during nine lessons over the course of a half term. It began with a lesson in which students were introduced to a number of different media (eg blogs, videos, Wikis and podcasts). Students were then given the opportunity to work in groups to play around with different types of hardware and software, and use them to **create** a short output of their choice about a subject that interested them. One group of girls decided to create a blog discussing their thoughts on whether society stereotypes children. Another group planned to make a short documentary about homelessness.

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This provided students with the opportunity to bring their existing interests into the classroom and gave them time to think about the advantages and disadvantages of different media. This served as preparation for deciding how to use technology to communicate with their peers about a particular topic from within the RE curriculum.

Students then worked in groups to research an assigned rite of passage. They used both internet and book research and used email to pass information to each other within their groups. At the beginning of this lesson, students were given tips on internet research and there was some class discussion about how to find reliable and relevant information.

“Maybe search two different websites and see if they say the same thing... But you have to be careful because some websites might be getting information from the first website you found –so both might be wrong.”
Year 9 girl

The purpose of the research was to find material for a PowerPoint presentation to teach the rest of the class about particular rites of passage, including the cultural reasons for people’s engagement in them. This meant that students needed to critically engage with the information they were finding in order to re-contextualise it and make it relevant for a particular defined audience. During these presentations, the audience of classmates were asked to fill in a worksheet with a series of questions about the topic they were hearing about.

“It’s been fun and we’ve learnt stuff because, like, we filled out all those sheets and we could fill them in from the stuff we’d done.”
Year 9 girl

The final part of the project involved students choosing a rite of passage and selecting any suitable form of digital media to create an output in a format of their choice that could be used as a communication and teaching resource for the next cohort of students.

Some students created videos about marriage or Bar and Bat Mitzva while others created PowerPoint presentations, but students were supported to think critically about their choice. One student defended her group’s choice of making a PowerPoint presentation by criticising the affordances provided by a blog.

“last time we did a blog... But the problem is you haven’t got as much, like, choice about how it looks and it’s all set formats...”
Year 9 girl

Throughout the project students were asked to write short notes to update their teacher and the rest of the class about what they had been doing. They also uploaded all their work onto a shared online space for the class, which was created using www.drop.io. This meant that all work was visible and could be commented on by peers. The teacher reminded them that everything they put on this space could be seen by her and that they needed to use it appropriately.

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Successes and next steps

The teacher felt that giving students the opportunity to create something in order to communicate subject knowledge to a defined audience gave the project "real meaning" because it made it relevant and purposeful. She was also able to allow students to engage in independent learning whilst also engaging in more formal direction when required. Students enjoyed the unit of work and reported learning new content related to their subject and the project created a bank of resources for future students to learn from. As a result of being involved in the project, the teacher is now advising on how digital literacy might be taught across the curriculum at her school.

There was a perception amongst the students that they already knew how to make a PowerPoint presentation and sometimes students therefore chose this as an easy option.

The teacher needed to intervene several times to help students to repurpose information rather than copying and pasting material they had found on the internet. Whilst the teacher was pleased with the variety of technology used, she would also have liked to see more students experiment with other formats but time and resources prevented this.

Some students found it hard to work in groups when they were using laptops. Students who weren't using laptops tended to be sitting doing nothing and needed support to realise that they could still contribute to the task even if they didn't have control of the mouse or keyboard. Although they had assigned themselves roles, they didn't always stick to these roles. As they develop their digital literacy skills, they could be supported to learn more about how to collaborate successfully using a range of digital technologies.

