



Key Stage 3

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Curriculum, Examination
and Assessment

Learning styles and writing in religious education

Teachers at Key Stage 3

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Useful sources:

Gardner, Howard *Frames of Mind* 1993 Fontana

Smith, Alistair *Accelerated Learning in the Classroom*
School Effectiveness Series, Network Educational Press 1996

www.alite.co.uk (accelerated learning, recommended books, etc.)

Teaching Thinking magazine published by Imaginative Minds,
27 Frederick Street, Birmingham B1 3HH

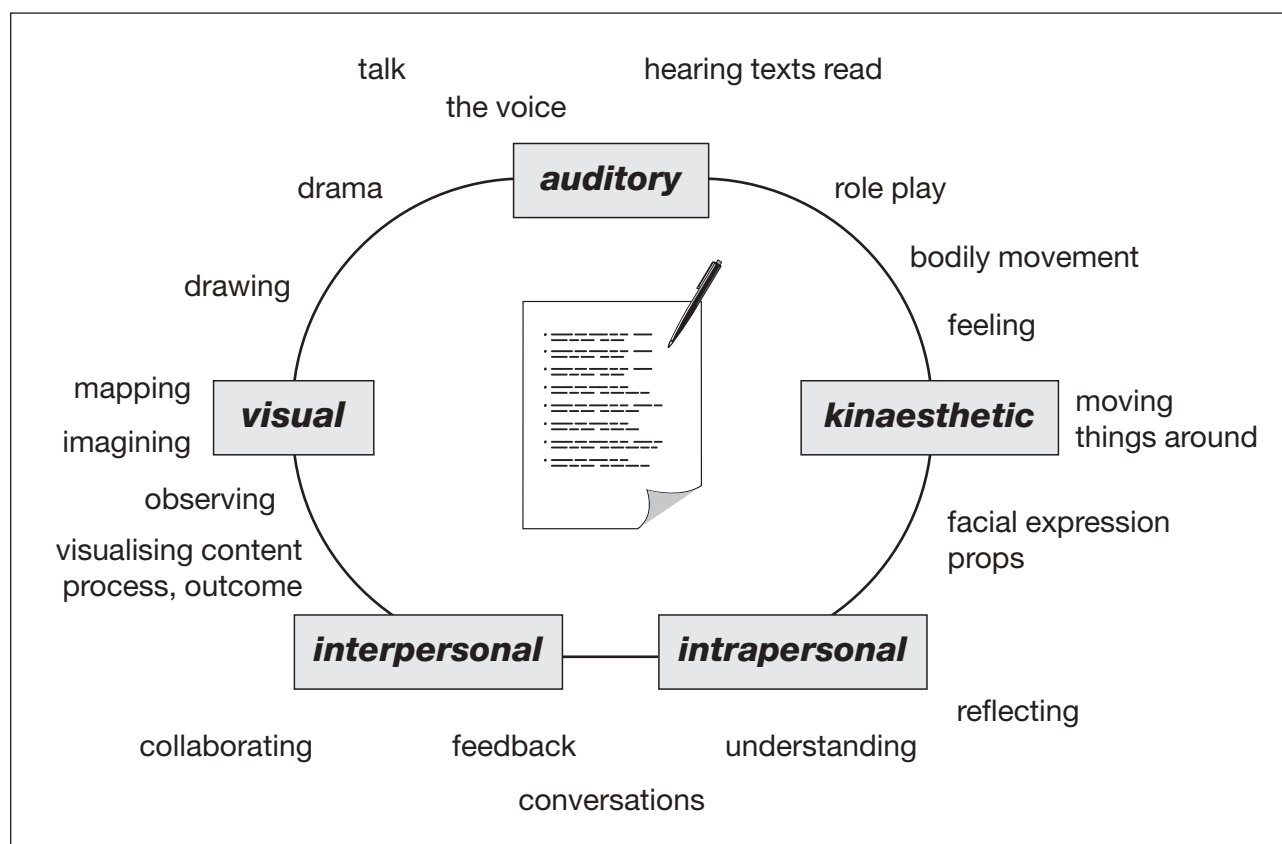
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Credits:

Clement Boden and Years 7, 8 and 9, Woodford County High
School for Girls, London Borough of Redbridge

Learning styles and writing in religious education



Understanding of the brain and how people learn has been growing over the last 20 years. The role of the senses in learning, long appreciated as ‘See it, hear it, do it’ is now more formalised as visual, auditory and kinaesthetic learning styles. Howard Gardner’s work on multiple intelligences has opened up our consideration of the many ways in which people learn. What does it mean for teachers of religious education? How can we help pupils access learning to develop their writing competences?

When reviewing our practice in teaching writing in the light of what we know about learning, it is reassuring to realise the range of techniques in use that draw upon different learning styles. None of the ideas proposed here is new, but reviewing our practice from the perspective of different styles of learning can bring back to the foreground practices that had slipped away, help us to systematically think about how *all* pupils might best access the writing curriculum and have a rationale for innovative approaches to enabling effective writing.

This overview of learning styles starts with ‘VAK’ (visual, auditory and kinaesthetic), but also has ‘interpersonal’ and ‘intrapersonal’ from Howard Gardner’s multiple intelligences because reflection and collaboration have always seemed so important to language development. This doesn’t aim to be a comprehensive guide; just a way in to thinking about learning and writing.

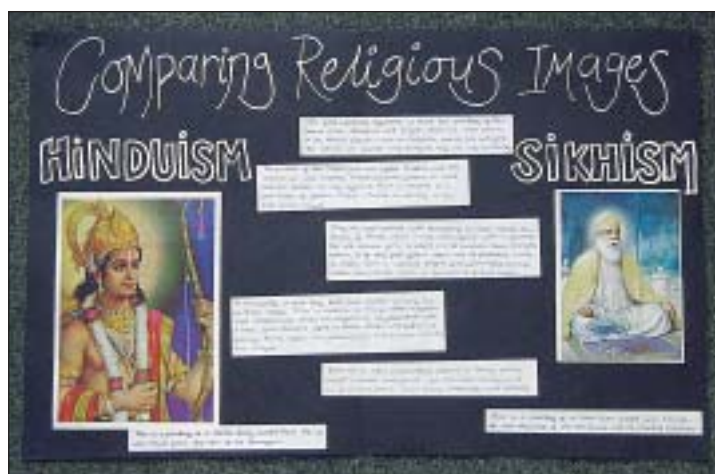
Preferred learning styles

When considering preferred styles of learning, it is probably more helpful to think of learning as a range of styles we all have to some degree – ‘having a strength in auditory learning’, for example, rather than ‘being an auditory learner’. The notion of a person having only one learning style is inappropriate, especially as our knowledge of learning styles is not complete by any means. We need to consider ways of accessing the full range of pupils’ learning strengths.

Visual learning

Writers can be encouraged to employ their visualising skills in considering the content, layout, length and process of writing. The visual is increasingly significant in pupils’ experience.

- **Visualising the content** Creating mental images of the learning as still pictures, or as a sequence of images of how it might look in a television documentary. After visualising, telling a partner helps process the images into language.
- **Drawing** Writers are often asked to illustrate their writing after they have finished, when the real value of drawing may be in enabling the writer to explore what they are going to write. It gives them time to think. The subsequent writing can be more logically structured and detailed than if they had written it straight off.
- **Visualising the writing process** ‘Seeing’ the whole text set out on the page, visualising how to write it, idea by idea, or paragraph by paragraph, where diagrams or maps will fit. This helps writers anticipate issues they may need to clarify with the teacher and is especially useful in preparing for written homework.
- **Drama** Improvising scenes or creating freeze frame/still images helps pupils appreciate the human dimension of religious education. In response to shared reading, enacting scenes can provide pupils with strong visual images that later help them in composing. Creating and watching mime can prompt reflective writing.
- **Photographs and illustrations** provide a wealth of information to investigate and discuss. Pupils can consider what people are doing and speculate about what they are thinking, leading to factual and reflective writing, e.g. puja, confirmation. Choosing an image to illustrate writing is an important dimension of writing for an audience.



Illustrations chosen to appeal to an audience

- **Pictures and real objects** to sort or rank for information writing appeal to learners in a way words alone may not. They can provide a starting point for learning that engages interest, e.g. artefacts, pictures, photographs and other sources.



Year 7 pupils exploring an idea in religious education prior to writing

- **Concept mapping** for information writing: topic webs and memory maps¹, useful at the exploratory stage of planning writing.
- **Plans and diagrams** Graphic plans with boxes; flow charts; tables/grids/matrices. Some people find organising ideas much easier in a graphic way than in written note form. Grids and flow charts help learners categorise ideas and processes. In composing, such devices can help the organisation of writing, e.g. comparison grids.
- **Studying examples of writing** – observational analysis – looking closely at layout, sentence construction, paragraphing, etc to see how it looks. Textmarking useful sentence structures or connectives can make abstract language more memorable for pupils.

- **Film, video and computer images** are powerful means to present information to pupils. It enables them to ‘meet’ people, experiencing the world through their eyes. Note-making from video can be very effective, because key points emerge for the viewer through visual input as well as words.



Year 8 pupils researching through their school website

- **Spellings** Focusing on word roots and families, using ‘look, cover, write, check’ to memorise spellings; seeing words within words – all these spelling approaches appeal to the visual learning style. The best spellers often have strong visual memories and can easily picture a word, once seen. Others need to consciously look for patterns to strengthen their visual spelling facility. Noticing word roots and making links with other words of related meaning can help, e.g. Guru (teacher), Gurdwara, Waheguru; syn-(together), synagogue.

¹ see www.alite.co.uk for more on memory mapping

Auditory learning

When composing a challenging piece of text, we often find we are saying the words aloud to ourselves to hear how it sounds; in reading, difficult text is often better understood when read aloud. Auditory learning is easy to overlook. It needs time, but if pupils are not listening to writing read aloud, they might be missing out on a way to develop their writing skills. Teachers of bilingual pupils recognise the need for auditory learning to promote the acquisition of the new language – and find all the pupils in the class benefit.

- **Hearing writing read aloud** Teachers reading to pupils, pupils reading their writing aloud to each other. It is well established that pupils acquire language most readily from their peers – so hearing another pupil's writing read aloud can be a powerful strategy in improving writing. Encourage pupils to 'borrow' words and phrases from each others' writing – try to build the ethos of a class all trying to improve their writing in religious education. Hearing rather than just reading is important. Some readers readily absorb language and transfer it to their own writing; others don't. Maybe this is because in focusing on the content, they haven't 'heard' the language. Hearing texts read aloud helps pupils absorb the style and idiom of texts in a way silent reading may not. Information texts sound differently to narrative. Familiarity with the sound and rhythm of factual writing can help writers as they compose, because they are enabled to 'hear' how it should sound.
- **Drama** Improvisation, freeze frame using thought-tracking. This benefits not only the generation of ideas for writing, but the language to express them. Pupils acting and freeze-framing a scene enable themselves and other pupils watching to describe actions, feelings and thoughts. Once expressed, this language becomes part of the heard repertoire that the pupils can draw on in writing. Significant words and phrases can be written on a flipchart or board for later reference. Dramatising incidents from the past, with pupils assuming roles with particular points of view, can consolidate learning and make abstract learning more effective and memorable.

- **Collaborative writing** Discussing in pairs and groups; hearing ideas and language, prompting a range of ways of expressing ideas. Oral drafting is so important – we often aren't sure how to think until we hear ourselves say it. The act of speaking facilitates composition; hearing



Real objects provide a starting point for learning

others speak stimulates our own powers of expression. Collaborative writing makes explicit the process of composition as pupils suggest, modify, confirm, justify, improve and refine their ideas together. The kind of thinking process we would want to be going on in an individual writer's head is just what goes on in conversation as pairs of pupils compose together.

- **Role play interviewing, telephoning** Oral drafting is very effective. Being in role and needing to conduct conversations in real time prompts spontaneous talk which later can be utilised in writing. All that is needed is a prop for a microphone or an imaginary mobile phone. Pupils readily suspend their knowledge that such devices weren't invented at the time. The language that will be needed in writing is rehearsed in a most enjoyable and involving way. Once thinking has been expressed through talk, the language patterns are there to enable written composition, e.g. role playing news interviews with an eye witness; giving a friend or relative a personal account of an event.
- **Hearing the voice** Hearing the sentence in one's head before writing. Very young writers need to repeatedly re-read their sentence as they build it up to hear what comes next. More experienced writers easily hear the whole sentence as they start to write it. Ask pupils to say their opening sentence aloud to a partner before they start to write. It encourages them to hear their writer's voice – and if they find they can't say their opening sentence, invite them to ask you for help. If they can't say it, they won't be able to write it. You can then intervene with support at the most appropriate time – there's nothing worse for an unconfident writer than sitting silently, stuck for how to begin.
- **Using writing frames and sentence starters** When pupils are making use of prompts provided by the teacher, saying the whole sentence aloud to a partner or to themselves helps to sort out the grammar of the rest of the sentence, and makes the language structure their own.
- **Music** As well as creating an ambience conducive to learning, music can encourage reflection. Music is a significant factor to consider in exploring styles of worship, e.g. matching music with religious setting.
- **Spellings** Learning through repeating letters aloud, hearing words within words, saying words in an exaggerated way, e.g. *ce-leb-ra-tion*, utilising sense of rhythm and rhyme.



Kinaesthetic learning

Feeling things physically is an effective way to learn. People learn by doing; some people find they think better with something in their hands. The power of role play and drama cannot be overestimated. Even a short time spent in role can have benefits in pupil involvement and motivation, not to mention increased understanding.

- **Visits** Feeling the atmosphere of a place; feeling the experience of walking, standing, sitting, kneeling in a particular building can encourage pupils to write more reflectively about the places they visit as part of their learning in religious education.



The Holy Spirit represented in stained glass

- **Moving around to collaborate with others** Anything that involves moving into groups, e.g. jigsawing, finding a different writing partner, sharing the outcomes of one's composing efforts with someone from a different group in the class, is a positive boon for pupils who need to be active. There is never time to hear all the pupils share their work – but asking pairs to decide who is 'X' and 'Y', and then asking all the Xs to stand up and find a new partner with whom to share their work gives all a real audience for their writing. Pupils do like to be active and physical movement has benefits for thinking.
- **Moving ideas physically** Sorting and ranking cards with key words or images, manipulating symbols/props helps pupils to focus. It develops the concept of sorting and rearranging ideas – an important part of the composing process. To experience the link between hand movement and thought, try to explain something without using gesture. Sorting facts under headings, sorting into chronological sequence, ranking facts in order of relevance to the question are all useful techniques for writing in religious education, enabling the quality of discussion that facilitates analytical and evaluative language to be expressed.
- **Spelling** Methods employing kinaesthetic learning incorporate touch and movement, e.g. tracing letters with a finger on a rough surface, practising whole words or words broken into meaningful parts in joined handwriting.
- **Regular breaks** to get up, stretch, move and breathe deeply can be helpful while writing. 'Brain gym' activities are intended to improve brain function. Make sure there is plenty of fresh air when pupils are learning. Stuffy classrooms encourage feelings of lethargy and irritability.

Interpersonal learning

- **Collaborative working**

Sharing and collaborating with others, talking things through; response partners in writing. Social activity is a powerful dimension of learning – it can often provide motivation for a task for which the pupil feels little intrinsic motivation. Think how popular a quiz can be, whereas the same questions asked of an individual in isolation would not be so



Year 9 pupils collaborating on research

motivating. As well as the benefits for language and social development, there are real benefits for learning. Collaborative working can provide the platform to enable pupils to move on in their understanding. In their efforts to negotiate meaning, learners gain a firmer grasp of concepts and increase their range of ways to express them.

Intrapersonal (knowledge about oneself)

- **Knowing learning objectives** is essential if pupils are to gain some control over their learning; then they can know whether they have achieved them and fit the new learning into current understanding. As well as religious education learning objectives, share relevant literacy objectives. This helps writers to know what they are aiming to achieve. WILF (What I'm Looking For) is a useful means of clarifying writing objectives explicitly for pupils.
- **Feedback** Positive feedback doesn't just raise self-esteem, it helps pupils develop a fuller awareness of their competences as writers. If they know what has worked well in their writing, they can consciously use that skill or language when appropriate in the future.
- **Reflection on experience** Drawing on pupils' own religious experiences in discussion can deepen the understanding not only of the listeners but also of the speaker. Expressing experiences can help pupils gain new insights as they explain themselves to others.

- **Reflection on learning** Opportunities to reflect on strengths and achievements can consolidate learning. Frameworks or questions can be used to prompt explicit reflection on processes used and effects achieved.



A display gives opportunity for pupils to reflect on learning

Multi-sensory approaches to interpreting texts are known to be effective in making reading more accessible to all pupils. Writing should be multi-sensory too. We should draw on all the various approaches and styles of learning that might work for the wide range of pupils in every class. The ultimate goal in teaching writing is to enable pupils to become writers for life, just as we hope they will become readers for life.

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