

Faith and Society Files: Church and School - Breathe

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Breathe is a brilliant resource for spiritual development for 16-19 year olds. Designed for use within an educational environment, it offers space for young people to engage with what Christians believe and to consider their own faith and beliefs about themselves, other people, the world and spirituality.

Using an iPod, students follow 12 short mp3 tracks with corresponding activities to guide their thinking. The tracks ask questions about self, individuality and identity, other people, interdependence and global community, creation, environmental issues and future, and God, Jesus and prayer. These, along with the simple practical tasks, make Breathe an ideal resource for all types of learner, providing something to satisfy the visual, audio and kinaesthetic minds.

Whilst the meditation texts offer a Christian perspective on these questions, the resource is designed for use in a multi-faith environment, taking care not to offend, nor enforce beliefs on anyone who may use it. Students of all faiths and none will find Breathe to be a refreshing and challenging opportunity to stop and reflect on their life, values and beliefs.

In 2009 a request was made by the BU Mission department for information from Baptist churches about their engagement with schools and colleges. This revealed some good links with pre-schools, primary and secondary schools, but a dearth of churches linking with sixth form and FE colleges. However, a survey of 17 year olds has shown that they are more spiritual and less atheistic than we may think.

A report of a research questionnaire from the Dare to Engage¹ initiative provides interesting evidence about the ways in which young people in 16-19 education in schools and colleges think about God and spirituality. The survey of about 500 young people, taken at six different schools, using the full cohort of students in an age-range in each case, provided data about their views that is not easy to find elsewhere. Of these young people, 28% described their religious identity as Christians, 32% as agnostic and 21% as atheists. In reporting their findings, Lat Blaylock and Peter Williams provided the following summary:

- The exploration of some of the depths of the 'God-question' with young people continues to be a key function of religious education in the 16-19 years.
- The common media stereotype of Britain as a 'multicultural society of atheists' is inaccurate about atheism. Among our age group they are a large minority, not more or less.

1 Dare to Engage is a project-based strategy to enable more and better work linking young people in schools and colleges with the Christian communities.

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- The understanding of religious language among the sample is disappointing: after - presumably - 11 years of school RE, many young people do not have much clarity about how to use the language of the transcendent in the ways that it normally functions in philosophy or religious study.
- The interesting and prevalent phenomenon of 'god-positive agnostics' might give encouragement to those who believe that there is a spiritual dimension to life. The comments characteristic of these young people imply some sort of yearning for the perceived 'pay off' of belief of god: 'If you believe, you have a good context for meaning-making: that would be good, but how can we know?' Could young people who experience these kinds of yearning find ways forward through engaging with faith in - for example - a Christian community, or in school RE? The possibility remains.²

2 *Seventeen year-olds: more spiritual than religious, less atheistic than you may have thought* Lat Blaylock and Peter Williams published in Resource 28:1 Autumn 2005 See also *Exploring the beliefs of 16-19-year olds, Part 2: Respect, spirituality, human rights, life after death*. Resource 29:1 Autumn 2006

Churches can make use of some excellent resources being produced for 16-19s, like *Breathe*, through making good contacts with the relevant people in sixth form and FE colleges and then facilitating and sponsoring the use of these materials for RE Days or weeks, actively supporting such occasions with prayer and, where appropriate, offering follow-up groups like Youth Alpha for anyone wanting to explore Christianity further.



Where does *Breathe* fit in post-16 education?

Breathe has been specifically created for use in a post-16 educational environment - Further Education colleges, Sixth Form colleges and years 12 and 13 in schools - and is a resource which churches can offer to their local schools and colleges. It aims to present the Christian faith in an accessible and thought-provoking way which will challenge and stimulate the mind of the older teenager.

The world of post-16 education comes in many shapes and forms. The three most common are schools, Sixth Form Colleges and FE colleges. The requirements for each of them regarding RE and Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural³ (SMSC) development differ slightly:

³ For more information about SMSC requirements, see <http://www.lsis.org.uk/Services/Publications/Pages/SMSC-Report.aspx>

● Schools

RE guidelines for schools state that they are required to provide a minimum number of hours of taught RE for all pupils who have not chosen to pursue it as an exam subject. Schools fulfil this in a number of ways, sometimes through tutorial curriculum material, or by hosting a number of RE day conferences for pupils throughout the year.

Schools are required to provide SMSC development opportunities for all pupils. This covers a wide range of elements, including self-awareness, understanding of other people's belief systems and critical thinking and evaluation skills.

Breathe can be used as part-fulfilment of both these requirements in schools, as well as making valuable contributions to other curriculum areas, including Citizenship, Personal, Social and Health Education, and Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning

Key contacts in the school environment will be the head of sixth form, the heads of year 12 or 13, the senior staff member responsible for pastoral services, the RE subject leader or the chaplain if there is one.

● Sixth Form Colleges

Sixth Form colleges are required to make Religious Education available for all students who wish to take it, usually in the form of a flexible course of study which develops critical thinking, spirituality, and the ability to evaluate and respond reasonably to the views of others. As with schools, some Sixth Forms offer this within the regular weekly timetable, whilst others host occasional RE day conferences.

Breathe can be offered for Sixth Form colleges as part of their regular RE provisions, for use within an RE day conference or for use by students in specific tutorial or subject groups as required.

Key contacts at Sixth Form colleges will be the head of pastoral support, the head of student services, the faith centre or chaplaincy co-ordinator or the person responsible for writing the tutorial curriculum.

● Further Education Colleges

All FE colleges are required to provide pastoral and tutorial support for pupils. SMSC is part of this requirement, often taking the form of equality and diversity events or chaplaincy provision. Unlike schools and Sixth Form colleges, FE colleges are not legally obliged to provide any form of Religious Education, although many local authorities do suggest that the guidelines for Sixth Form colleges are followed. Many FE colleges fulfil the requirements of their tutorial curriculum using theme weeks and special events focusing on specific aspects.

Breathe can be used in FE colleges as part of their yearly tutorial curriculum, for one-off uses in theme weeks, as an activity alongside specific religious celebrations or as a drop-in resource hosted by the chaplaincy.

Key contacts in FE colleges will be the head of student services, specific subject leaders or chaplaincy staff.

What would using the Breathe resource involve?

Breathe is based on a large circular floor mat measuring 10m in diameter. Young people are given an iPod for the session, containing 12 short meditation tracks. Each segment contains a simple activity which, along with the corresponding meditation on mp3, form a reflection relating to a specific aspect of life.

A session with Breathe lasts about an hour and can accommodate up to 30 students at a time. The session starts with a video explaining how Breathe works, and encouraging students to relax, approach the activities with an open mind and to take the time to really consider their own responses to the questions raised. Pupils then use the meditations and activities at their own pace, and in whichever order they choose, before regrouping for feedback and a short closing video.



● For the school or college:

The school or college will need to provide you with a room big enough to accommodate the 10m diameter mat on which forms the basis of the Breathe activities, and including at least three power sockets and the facilities needed for projecting video material. The room will need to be locked when not in use, over lunchtime sessions or, if Breathe is being used for more than one day, overnight. Each group of students must have a member of staff from the college accompanying them for the duration of the Breathe session.

Hiring Breathe costs £450 for the first day, and £250 for each additional consecutive day. A discounted rate is available for Further Education institutions of £250 for the first day, and £150 for each following day.

For more information please visit
www.schoolswork.co.uk/breathe

