As RE teachers, we live in challenging times. The impact of the original EBacc, pressure for results, timetable restrictions and, frankly, Michael Gove, have meant that we have to be more inventive in how we present our beloved subject to the masses. RE is a living subject; it lives in the people and concepts and practices that exist in this country and beyond, and in order for our students to fully engage in what RE is all about, they need to experience and understand RE as a ‘living thing’. Well, herein lies the problem.

Many teachers are being prevented from taking students out of lessons and are having to rely on digital and printed media to present and create this life. And, thankfully, the skills of this country’s RE teachers are making it work. What if, however, there was a way to bring these believers and practices and concepts to the masses via the media we depend so much upon?

I was lucky to work with OUP on the series of KS3 RE textbooks and online resources called, appropriately, Living Faiths. I’ve been teaching long enough to see many rotations of textbooks over the years, all of which fell short of being regularly useful, except for cover. The premise of Living Faiths is to show people of faith living through it day by day; at the heart of the series are film clips of families from each of the six world faiths, talking about what they believe, why they believe and how they face the challenges of the modern world. The clips are short and focused on key questions and concepts so they can be used to begin a lesson, change its course or bring a moment of reflection. In short, they’re useful, real, and lesson-friendly!

In the Christianity Student Book and Kerboodle, we interviewed three families, the Arens, who are Anglicans, the Fellers, a Catholic family, and Isaac White and his parents who are Quakers. The aspect that I think makes this series stand apart from others is that each of these families shows a healthy realism about their faith and, as a result, you don’t get misleading standards of ‘this is what a Christian believes/says/does’. Students in my class really love to watch these films, as they get to encounter doubt, hope, and different interpretations of religious texts and themes. By listening to and reading these families’ perspectives, my students can gradually build a wonderful picture of the variety that exists in religions in Britain today.

Bringing real people of faith into your classroom
By Julie Haigh
For example, in the lesson ‘To forgive or not to forgive?’, the Arens family discusses the concept of forgiveness and, initially, the two children, Lilian and Richard, offer their own definitions that are heartfelt in their simplicity. But through guided discussions, some of my students carry on to have some fascinating conversations about the basic principles of forgiveness. Some of the key questions that came out included, ‘Is there an unforgivable act?’, ‘Is forgiveness only really forgiveness if it requires effort?’, ‘Does forgiveness come from responding to the intention of the act or from feeling better about it?’

Later in the clip, we see Mr Arens, an Anglican priest, discussing the humanity and difficulty of forgiveness. He suggests, unexpectedly, that sometimes, as humans, it is not even appropriate to forgive and that emotions and feelings associated with the need for forgiveness are not something to be ignored. What is then useful for the RE teacher, is how he then applies his faith to this challenge and the impact it has in how he responds to those who need his forgiveness. When I used this clip with my Year 8 students, their responses were varied and often surprising. Many of them found Mr Arens’ suggestion that forgiveness was not always appropriate as incompatible with being a Christian, and this led to some very interesting work on the possibilities and impossibilities of faith in imperfect humans. One student asked about the forgiveness offered by Jesus and whether or not this was setting an unreachable example for humans. Another questioned whether forgiving individuals over and over again was simply being ‘a walkover’ and not showing love.

At OUP, we have also received feedback from other teachers who are using the families in the books to really get students to engage deeply with the faith they’re studying, and to ask questions. One school near Bath even sent us a lovely set of questions from their Year 7 class, asking Mr Arens further questions relating to his response to the topic ‘What does it mean to experience God?’. We were really pleased to be able to put Mr Arens in touch with the class, and he was able to answer very honest questions from the students, including ‘Do you think anybody can speak to God?’ and ‘How does God speak if he doesn’t speak like Darth Vader?’

There are many clips in the whole series that will equally stimulate, challenge, inform and delight. Each clip is accompanied by a Film Worksheet, which includes key questions from within the unit and directly reflects the content in the Student Books. If you can’t get out of the classroom and to places of worship and people of faith, this may just be the next best thing: Living Faiths can truly bring religious education to life!

I hope this insight has sparked some ideas for your classroom and will help you to engage your students.

Best wishes,

Julie Haigh

Julie is Head of RE at Stroud High School in Gloucestershire

To find out more about Living Faiths, and try out some resources for free, visit www.oxfordsecondary.co.uk/livingfaiths