

Learning Outside the Classroom

Sacred Cows, Open Inquiry - a provider's perspective

Visits to Bhaktivedanta Manor Temple

What were we trying to achieve?

The opportunity for students to:

- directly experience faith practices and encounter practitioners
- appreciate and understand the often unfamiliar concepts and practices of Hinduism, and their relevance to today's world
- make spiritual enquiry and become active, responsible learners
- recognise the value of multi-faith religious education

Cost

£6.00-£8.00 per head for groups of over 30 for a full day including traditional vegetarian lunch; small discount if just half a day; travel costs.

Who visits? How many?

Bhaktivedanta Manor can cater for students between the ages of 4 and 18 years, including those with special learning needs and groups of up to 150 per day.

Preparation:

Although 'The Manor' has standard packages, staff always discuss details in advance so each visit is tailor made. Visits can be a 'starter' or build on previous learning; staff can discuss strategies for follow up work, and also provide detailed guidelines on required codes of conduct and risk assessment.

How do we organise the learning?

1. Tour of temple and farm - get close to nature and animals, confront stereotypical notions about cows.
2. Engage in dialogue with presenters who are all practitioners, most grounded in western culture.
3. Dressing up workshops - this takes students out of their formal roles as learners, and allows them to be creative in a safe, non-threatening and self-affirming environment.
4. Observe the *arti* ceremony - staff explain the symbolism and significance of this ceremony; this experience is highly sensory and allows students to consider what worship can mean to the practitioner.
5. Traditional vegetarian lunch - a taste of Hindu hospitality

What is the impact of the experience?

Most students go away with a favourable experience of Hinduism and of life's spiritual dimensions. It enables them to begin to explore the relevance of spiritual teachings to their own lives, especially in terms of diet, drugs and drink, and attitudes towards animals and the environment. They often find that their developing convictions are suitably reinforced or constructively challenged. One long-term impact is that some students later come back as RE teachers, bringing their own groups!

Staff have found that visits especially help disaffected children, with learning and behavioural difficulties. One support teacher remarked. "Jane really benefited from the Sita and Rama role play. In fact, I've never heard her speak so much in the four years I have been teaching her. I was amazed."

Follow up:

Strategies include writing descriptions of the visit, sending 'thank you' letters, or follow-up research projects. Some schools invite students to make a collaborative presentation to the rest of the school (e.g. as part of an assembly) or individually write an article for the school magazine.

Contacts and links:

www.ies.iskcon.com (for ISKCON Educational Services site)

www.mandir.org/booking/index.htm (for visiting the Swaminarayan temple in Neasden)