So you’ve been invited to take an assembly, and now you’re wondering what on earth you’re going to do. Don’t panic! Whether you’re about to take a primary or secondary assembly, or perhaps stand in front of a group of sixth formers, this guide will take through the stages of planning the content, presenting on the day, and some vital do’s and don’t’s. The challenge is not only for your assembly to run smoothly, but for your presentation to have a real and lasting impact on the students.

Starting points

There are some factors you can’t change or control about an assembly and understanding these possibilities and limitations is an good starting point for your planning.

What year groups will be in the assembly?
In the past, it was common for assemblies to include the whole school, or at least the ‘lower’ or ‘upper’ school. These days it’s more common to have a single year group. The broader the age range, the more carefully you’ll have to think about creating content that will suit everyone present.

If you’re doing a series of assemblies, presenting to each year group in turn, you’ll also have to think about how your content may need to change. What challenges and engages a Year 2 student is very different to a Year 6 student. The same is true for Year 7 and Year 11 students at secondary level.

What time of day is the assembly?
Traditionally assemblies have been first thing in the morning, but that’s no longer always true. Mid-morning is popular, as is straight after lunch, but in fact it could be any time. Expect some restlessness if it’s scheduled for the end of the school day. If it’s somewhere in the middle of lessons, don’t necessarily imagine there will be an empty hall to set up in beforehand: it may be used by classes right up until your assembly begins.

How long is the assembly?
Marathon assemblies that last the full 50 minutes or more of a lesson do happen, but the vast majority will be shorter, perhaps 15 minutes. Bear in mind that this will include some introductions, notices and even the students getting in and out of the hall. Work on the basis that you’ll have 8 to 10 minutes, but be prepared to run longer or shorter if needed. Primary assemblies will tend to be lengthier and more relaxed. The longer the assembly the more opportunity there will be to develop a theme, but the bigger the challenge to keep the attention and involvement of your listeners.

Where will the assembly take place?
The school hall is the most common place for an assembly, but you’ll need to check if you are expecting to
be able to cut out any daylight to use a projector: there may be curtains or blinds but there's no guarantee any of them will work! Also, halls often act as corridors to get to other parts of the school. Sometimes schools will stop people walking through during an assembly, but not always. Noise and disturbances may have to be catered for whilst you're speaking.

**Is this an ‘Act of Worship’?**

In England and Wales, children and students are required to take part in ‘an act of worship’ every day. This is a legal requirement set out in The Education Reform Act (1988), modified by the Education Act (1993). The Law puts several important obligations on schools (and the Board of Governor’s specifically):

- Every student should take part in an act of worship each school day (note the exception to this below).
- The act of worship must be of a “wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character, reflecting the broad traditions of Christian belief.” That means it must reflect the Christian faith, though this is interpreted very widely. This requirement does not mean that every assembly should be Christian, but that over the course of a school year, at least 51% should be of a “broadly Christian nature”. Christian topics can be interpreted widely and might include assemblies on the anything from the environment to pilgrimage. Crucially, they’re not just meant to communicate information; they’re to be an act of worship. Again, this is interpreted widely, and certainly doesn’t equate just to singing Christian songs and hymns. It might also include opportunities to reflect or meditate quietly. (It’s worth noting that singing together as a group is now almost unheard of in secondary school assemblies.)
- The act of worship can take place at any time of the school day, in any part of the school and with any group of pupils. In others words, a reflection in tutor groups at the beginning of the day would suffice. Although assemblies are often used to fulfill this requirement, assemblies and acts of worship are not one and same thing.
- Parents can withdraw their pupils from the requirement of a daily act of worship. Teachers can withdraw themselves too.
- Schools can apply for a ‘determination’ which means these conditions are lifted. This often happens in schools where the number of pupils from different faiths makes the requirement unsuitable.

Some schools will see assemblies as an integral part of providing an ‘act of worship’; others will use daily reflections in tutor groups and other ways to meet the legal requirements. And, of course, some schools may turn a blind eye to these obligations altogether.

However, schools are also under an obligation to promote students’ spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. These rather vague terms are not meant to be covered in a particular lesson, they are to happen across the school as a whole in lots of ways. For example, when a theatre company is invited to perform to the school, it might be considered ‘cultural’ development.

In reality, and perhaps not surprisingly, schools find spiritual development the hardest of these to implement. A good assembly from you, providing spiritual input, will be a welcome addition. You can read more about spiritual development in schools in a 1995 guide, still widely used by schools, from the (now defunct) Schools Curriculum Assessment Authority, *Spiritual and Moral Education*.

**Why am I taking an assembly?**

- **Spiritual development.**
  You're contributing to the school's programme of spiritual development, offering a vital service.
Connecting church and school.
You’re representing the church, both locally and more generally, and developing the crucial link and relationship between the two.

Challenging students’ perceptions and ideas about faith, spirituality and values.
You’ll be able to get student’s thinking about some of the important questions of life, and share how you see things as a Christian. You may also be able to break down prejudice and assumptions about Christians.

Introducing yourself.
Students will hopefully not only remember your name, but how interesting and funny you were too! Expect to find it a lot easier to talk to pupils informally around a school once you have done a good assembly. Remember that there are lots of teachers present in an assembly, and for many of them this will be one of the few times they see you ‘in action’. It’s a great opportunity to make a good impression!

Gaining credibility.
Assemblies are a good starting point for further work in a school. Prove yourself in this arena, and you may find it possible to contribute into other areas of school life.

It’s easy to assume an assembly is a chance to tell a group of young people your beliefs and views, and to persuade them how right you are, but this doesn’t really do justice to what a good assembly can and should be about. You’ll certainly want to share your views and beliefs, but in the context of enabling the students to think about theirs. However passionate you are about your faith, and however convinced you are that you’re right, an assembly is not a context to recruit converts: it’s a place for students to reflect, explore and engage not just as individuals but also as a school community.

The best assemblies are the ones that get students thinking and engaging with a topic for themselves. In other words, it’s not about telling the students something, it’s about giving them some space to reflect and engage with important topics. Think of yourself as a facilitator more than a speaker.

Choosing a topic

Sometimes you’ll be given a topic for an assembly, which can be very specific (Remembrance Day, Christmas) or incredibly broad (Love, Happiness, Future, Feelings). Or you may have a free choice. Either way, you’ll need to think carefully about the specific issues you’re going to tackle. If your assembly is only 8 to 10 minutes, there’s very little time to cover more than a few thoughts and it’s easy to forget this in planning and end up preparing something much too grand and detailed for the short time available.

One of the easiest ways to narrow down your subject is to reduce the topic to a single question that you’re going to address. Doing this not only gives you a much clearer focus, it also helps students take a single clear point away from the assembly. Of course, there are many questions you could ask about a topic, so it’s a matter of choosing the one you think will work the best.

So, for example:

> ‘Remembrance Day’ could become ‘Do you believe in anything strongly enough to make a stand for it?’
> ‘Christmas’ could become ‘What present would make you the happiest?’
> ‘Love’ could become ‘What makes love last?’
> ‘Happiness’ could become ‘What three things would guarantee you a happy life?’
> ‘Future’ could become ‘What would you like to be like in 10 years time?’
> ‘Feelings’ could become ‘Is anger always wrong?’
> ‘Friendship’ could become ‘Who would you call your best friend?’
> ‘Self esteem’ could become ‘What do you do when you feel low about yourself?’
Planning the content

The next stage is to begin to gather possible content for your assembly. You’ll only have time for a few elements, but pull together what you can find. It may help to note down what you have under three key headings. A good assembly will generally include all three of these at some point.

Visual illustrations
Standing on your own at the front of a bare school hall, having a visual illustration can be a huge help. It might be:

- a prop you hold... anything from a tin can to a box of chocolates!
- a picture or illustration you hold up
- a picture up on a screen using an overhead or media projector
- a film clip
- or anything else imaginative and different!

Participation
Assemblies are not the time to play a massive game of Bulldog, and participation from 200 students sitting in rows may seem difficult, but you can still get everyone involved.

- asking a question that students have to think about themselves or discuss with a partner sitting next to them
- using volunteers at the front to help with an illustration
- prepared input, using art work, drama or written work prepared by a group of students beforehand
- instant reaction, getting some students to respond to an idea or question immediately before or during an assembly, like a hands up poll.

Story
“The universe is made up of stories not atoms.” (Muriel Rukeser). Stories are the way we communicate so much of ourselves and our beliefs. A good assembly will nearly always have a story in it: not just longer made-up stories, but simple things that have happened to you too. A story might take a few minutes to tell or just a few seconds, it might be personal or taken from someone else’s life. It could be told or acted out, or even listened to on CD.

Once you have a question to work with, try listing down any possible content under these three sections. If any of them are empty, you have some work to do to find something to include.

Reflection
A good assembly will include some time and space for students to reflect on what they’ve seen and heard, applying it to their own lives and experiences. This could include a time of quiet, with or without a question for students to consider, some music, a slideshow of pictures or questions. The reflective part of an assembly is the point where students have the opportunity to say to themselves ‘what does this mean to me?’

Where to find content

You’ll find plenty of links here at schoolswork.co.uk to help you track down good illustrations and ideas, plus you can check out our Resource Toolkit or even post a request for help on the community blog.

Putting it all together

Let’s imagine I’ve been given the topic ‘spiritual life’ for an assembly with Year 10 students in a local high school. How am I going to put together some material for this?
I’d start by turning it into a question that I can ask the students. Although ‘Do you have a spiritual side?’ is a closed question, it’s a provocative one nevertheless, so I’ll make that the topic for the assembly. Then I need to assemble some possible components. At this stage I’m not too worried about the order, or even if I’ll include them all, I just want to get an idea of what might be possible. To help, I’ll go through the three key types of content:

**Visual**

There must be plenty of artwork on the subject of spirituality, both from classic and modern art. I’ll download some images from a Google image search and make them into slides to display as students are coming into the hall. The final slide can be the question I’m going to be asking and I’ll keep that up through the rest of assembly. Assuming I have a little time to organise this, I’ll ask some students to describe their spiritual side artistically, using drawing or painting. If possible I might seek the help of an art teacher and see if they can help. I’ll hope to end up with three or four images that I can use during the assembly, either holding up the finished pieces or showing slides of them. You can see the amazing ideas students have come up with on the topic of spirituality at the Spirited Arts web site, run by the National Association of Teachers of Religious Education. You could also use some of the winning art work as part of your assembly if getting your local students to contribute is impractical.

**Participation**

There are lots of ways I could involve some students.

- I could hand paper and pens out to the front row of students (who’ll be sitting there longest waiting for the rest of the group to file in) and ask them to jot their immediate response down to the question. Maybe give them some choices: yes, no, what does that mean, don’t know. I can gather up the answers and use them later in the assembly.
- I could bring some prepared content from students: perhaps the results of a wider poll I took in a previous lunch break.
- I could put up on a screen some possible answers to the question and ask students to take a moment to think about which one makes the most sense to them.

**Story**

Again, there are lots of stories I could put in here. I could choose some different people from history and ask if they had a spiritual side. So, did Mother Teresa have a spiritual side? What about Robbie Williams or Simon Cowell? Most of all, I could answer the question for myself, perhaps telling a short story about a moment in my life that illustrates this. I could also make my own drawing about how I see my spiritual side as a Christian.

**Reflection**

There are lots of ways I could end the assembly, but the simplest is 60 seconds of silence. To help students focus I could put up a couple of relevant questions on a screen.

Looking at the materials I’ve put together, I’m now going to pull a final selection together that should last for 8 to 10 minutes in the assembly.

1. Slides of artwork on spirituality as students enter.
2. Introduce question and share responses from the front row of students who’ve already answered on post-it notes. Some will hopefully be deep and thoughtful, others may be funny and get everyone laughing. I’ll also tell students that I’ll be asking all of them to think about how they might answer the question themselves later in the assembly.
3. Show three slides of student’s work on ‘my spiritual side’ each with a short explanation and hopefully including very different views (I don’t have a spiritual side,’ I have a strong faith’ etc).
4. Show my own slide, a painting of how I see my spiritual side as a Christian. As I show the slide, I tell the story of an experience when I felt especially close to God during a downpour of rain. It includes plenty of humour and self-deprecation! I’ll also talk briefly about how important Christian spirituality is to me.
5. I’ll finish with a minutes silence and, on the screen, two questions for students to consider: “Do you have a spiritual side?” and, alongside a quote from Robbie Williams about spirituality, the question “Do you agree?”

The key here is that I’m not using the assembly to ‘preach’ the point “YOU MUST HAVE A SPIRITUAL SIDE, AND IT MUST BE CHRISTIAN!” I’m using a question to get students thinking and offering some possible answers, including my own from my faith perspective.

The reality of taking an assembly

After all your preparation, it’s time for the assembly itself. This is where some flexibility is essential. Assemblies are prone to all kinds of interruptions and unexpected events, and you’ll need to be ready to fit what you have to whatever happens. For example:

- The assembly includes the PE staff reporting back on recent matches. They take a long time and you’re left with 5 minutes not 10. What are you going to drop from your assembly to fit in with the reduced time?

- The teacher starts the assembly by telling the students off for something. The atmosphere changes and you have to follow on with your presentation. How are you going to create the right atmosphere?

- Students are late and come in during your input. It disturbs everyone and you lose your train of thought. How will you cope?

- Anything technical you thought was going to be there for you isn’t. You can’t use those pictures up on a screen after all. Will your assembly still work? If your whole presentation depends on something technical working, make sure you have a back up plan in case it all goes wrong (and it does from time to time!).

Some dos

- Do use humour, honesty, and a large dose of reality. Talk about issues that matter to young people and be prepared to admit when your own faith doesn’t have all the answers. Students can see through hypocrisy and spin in an instant.

- Do be sensitive. If your assembly touches on a particularly sensitive topic like death or suicide, make sure you talk to the school and check it’s appropriate, especially if you find, for example, there has been a recent bereavement for a pupil.

- Do have fun. Some assemblies are more serious than others, but having fun is a good way to engage young people, and even explore serious topics. As a guest speaker your assembly should look and feel a little different from the norm.

Some don’ts

- Don’t go over time unless it’s with the express agreement of the person leading the assembly. There may be a lesson in the hall immediately after the assembly which you will hold up, and teachers who have to head off from the assembly to teach a class won’t appreciate it when you make them late.

- Don’t create too much noise or over-excitement. Whipping a group of twelve year olds into a frenzy will not please the maths teacher who has to take their lesson straight after the assembly. Assemblies are often best when they contain humour and fun, but remember this is a very different context to a youth group.
Don’t humiliate or pick on students to make a point. Be careful not to embarrass students by making fun of them or playing a cruel joke at their expense. If you are going to involve students in something substantial, you may want to arrange it with them beforehand. Of course, that doesn’t mean you can’t ask for volunteers in an assembly. You might also want to remember:

- nobody (including boys) tends to like having their hair messed up!
- nobody brings an extra school uniform to school, so don’t spill anything on them!
- some people blush very easily in public, especially if they have fair skin.

Don’t preach. Assemblies are not churches or even youth events, they’re part of school life. As a guest, your role is to serve the students and school, not take advantage of the opportunity you’ve been given to do something inappropriate. Your faith is absolutely right to share as something that should create questions and reaction in those listening, but you’re not there to make converts.

Go for it!

As Christians, it’s a privilege to be able to visit schools and take assemblies. And, although you’ll make mistakes along the way, a well thought though assembly can make a huge impact. Be encouraged that you’re making an important contribution and share your experiences on the schoolswork.co.uk community blog.

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