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# RE-searchers: a dialogic approach to RE in primary schools

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How, in manageable yet challenging ways, can the complexity of theological and religious studies be translated into RE classroom practice? This article outlines an innovative and exciting approach in which this has been attempted.

## Introduction

This article offers what we believe to be a new and creative approach to understanding the nature and purpose of Religious Education (RE) through a practical illustration of how this approach has been implemented in one Cornish primary school. There we trialled a simple technique, partially inspired by Edward De Bono's *Six Thinking Hats* (1985), to draw children into active shared inquiry in the field of theological and religious studies. We developed four cartoon characters each with very different research strengths and interests, but all committed to theological and religious studies. Together they were known as the 'RE-searchers', but individually they were called Know-it-all Nicky, Debate-it-all Derek, Ask-it-all Ava and Have-a-go Hugo (see the cartoons on the following pages). Any resemblance between these characters and any real person(s), living or dead, is *not* purely coincidental as they were very loosely inspired by some of the pedagogical approaches outlined in Michael Grimmitt's widely used and highly recommended textbook *Pedagogies of Religious Education* (2000). By discussing the academic predilections of these characters and thinking about what it would mean to perceive religious subject content through their eyes, we found that we were able to introduce pupils to more abstract issues concerning the nature of religion(s) and religious knowledge, and to provide them with opportunities to assess the strengths and weaknesses of differing methodologies and methods.

## Curriculum trial

The characters proved popular as they were introduced throughout the school at all key stages with differing amounts of information being given at each stage and in age-appropriate language. The greatest successes came in Key Stage 2. On 'Ask-it-all Ava Day', pupils in mixed classes completed a rotation morning interviewing four Christians from four different denominations. They asked the same questions of each interviewee in order to identify commonalities and disagreements. Time was then given over to discussing the efficacy of this approach and what they had learned about the diversity of viewpoints within Christianity. At the end of the day, the pupils were asked to complete self-assessments. Here are some of the most positive and articulate responses we received from Year 5 pupils:

- 'I think that the interview was a good way of learning because we don't normally make interviews of people. Making changes instead of doing the same old, same old, it makes me like learning when it is different and its actually learning two things – how to be Ask-it-all Ava and about the people.'
- 'I do understand how to conduct an Ask-it-all Ava inquiry.'
- 'I think this was more effective because the way we have learnt was by talking to each person so I am more likely to remember. It was also fun. I thought it was good because it was direct.'
- 'I think it is a good way of learning because [the interviewees] were all different. They were all Christians but they all have different modern Christian heroes.'
- 'The interviews helped me understand other people's beliefs and what they believe is Christian and what they need to do to be a Christian in their eyes. I like the lesson because I liked to learn about their beliefs. I also liked the lesson because it was different and I will remember it more easily.'

On another occasion, to develop the pupils' ability to empathise with contrasting perspectives, Year 5 and 6 pupils were asked to write a letter in the role of Know-it-all Nicky as if addressed to Have-a-go Hugo, and then to write a suitable letter in reply. In both letters, writing as each character, the pupils had to describe and justify which aspects they had most enjoyed about the same RE lesson, which had purposefully involved multiple teaching methods and diverse learning activities, bearing in mind their methodological preferences. On further occasions, pupils were asked to explore differing aspects of the same religion or similar aspects of different religions from the perspective of one or more of these characters, and then asked to evaluate the effectiveness of each RE-searcher's approach. Finally, pupils were asked to consider which of these approaches (if any) cohere with their own research strengths and interests and to develop their own cartoon characters representative of their personal approaches.

To gauge overall pupil reactions to the approach, semi-structured interviews were undertaken with three focus groups, each representing a different year group (Years 3–5) and each containing three pupil volunteers. The two negative comments we received both stemmed

from the same Year 5 pupil who considered the cartoon characters to be inappropriate for his age group ('babyish') and the activities to be too easy. (The actual attainment of this particular pupil does not reflect his perception of the level of difficulty of the set tasks.) Here is a selection of the most positive responses received from our participants:

- 'They help me with my learning and teach me new strategies to learn with.' (Year 5 pupil)
- 'I like using them because when you are using the super heroes it makes you think more and learn more. It is challenging and better than doing easier stuff.' (Year 4 pupil)
- 'I like it because we can learn to be like them and learn from them. It puts me in another world! It puts me in their shoes.' (Year 4 pupil)
- 'I like it because it helps me understand how people find their way through life: asking questions or finding out information and applying it to their lives and to their knowledge of life. And it helps me know how I can get my way through my life.' (Year 4 pupil)
- 'I prefer using the superhero. When we didn't have them people were disappointed to know they had RE in the afternoon. Now I am excited about RE. We don't know which superhero we are going to be!' (Year 3 pupil)

Overall, the affirmative responses from pupils confirmed our belief in the potential benefits of the approach.

## The RE-searchers

### 1 Know-it-all Nicky (observer/recorder)



Nicky likes to know everything! She likes to find out information from lots of different sources: for example, books, articles, webpages, and even by observing people and noting down what they do. She is interested in recording facts, figures and what unfamiliar words mean. Through the accumulation of a wide range of knowledge about religions she hopes to

broaden and deepen her understanding.

Nicky enjoys comparing people's thoughts and actions, whether they belong to the same religion or to different ones. This enables her to see similarities and differences. She likes to catalogue and categorise religious beliefs, practices and experiences, to uncover common core characteristics, and to think about how best to define religion.

She likes learning about religions and tries to be as accurate as possible when describing what religious people believe, say and do. She also likes to use their own words as far as possible. She tries to avoid making personal judgements about people's beliefs and practices and tries to avoid getting into arguments about whether they are right or wrong.

### 2 Debate-it-all Derek (philosopher/critic)



Derek is interested in what is true and what is good. He asks Big Questions, such as: Is there a God? What happens after we die? What is good and evil?

He likes to think about agreements and disagreements between religions, to decide which views he agrees with (if any), and always seeks to justify his beliefs with good reasons and evidence.

He wants to know what he and other people believe. He asks himself and other people lots of questions. He often responds to answers by asking further questions. He never gets tired of questioning, being critical or trying to improve his own and other people's arguments.

He likes to meet other people to discuss Big Questions in order to learn about and from their beliefs. He likes to analyse and test the logic of other people's arguments and the evidence upon which they are based. This helps him to recognise and evaluate his own beliefs. He is not interested in being impartial or neutral. In fact, he doesn't think this is possible.

### 3 Ask-it-all Ava (interviewer/communicator)



Ava is interested in talking to religious people and understanding their interpretation of the world. She likes trying to understand people whose views and ways of life are different from her own. She uses this knowledge to reassess her own beliefs, values and behaviour, and to

understand better what it means to be human.

Ava is interested in people's religious backgrounds, how they have shaped their lives and the way they make sense of the world around them. Ava is sensitive when discussing issues which are important to believers and tries to understand their point of view as best she can. She tries to empathise with them and their personal experiences.

Ava likes looking for similarities and differences between people's beliefs and practices. She is also interested in comparing what she knows about religious traditions generally with what she finds out by interviewing individual members of these traditions. She finds that there are sometimes differences between what is traditional within a religion and what individuals believe, say and do. She thinks understanding these similarities and differences gives her a better understanding of religions generally.

#### 4 Have-a-go Hugo (participator/experiencer)



Hugo believes that emotions, feelings and experiences are more important than beliefs and doctrines when trying to understand religious people. He is interested in what people feel to be true in their hearts rather than what they believe to be true in their heads.

In order to understand what it is to be religious, Hugo thinks you need to have

had religious emotions, feelings and experiences or at least be capable of imagining and appreciating them. To explain, he likens the study of religion to the study of music. Unless you've experienced powerful sensual feelings when listening to awe-inspiring music, you cannot fully understand it no matter how long you look at the notes on the page. So Hugo wants to know or imagine what it feels like to be religious and to be able to sympathise with those that are.

Hugo likes to get in touch with his emotions and feelings and with those of other people. He likes to have an open mind, to see things from different points of view, and is not afraid of trying out new things. By participating in religious activities, he believes that he can share similar experiences and develop greater empathy with religious people. In order to explore a religious person's way of life and behaviour, he is willing to try it out for himself for a while, even if he doesn't like it.

#### A dialogic form of RE

This example of practice in RE in one Cornish primary school illustrates a theoretical approach to RE which we would call dialogic. Dialogic education is not just education through dialogue but education *for* dialogue (Wegerif 2012). In the context of RE, dialogic education begins with the assumption that it is not the responsibility of religious educators to promote any particular theory or definition as true, but to facilitate the discussion and evaluation of a plurality of perspectives. This dialogic approach puts the emphasis on engaging in the many dialogues that form the fields of theological and religious studies. Through engaging in the practice of shared research, children naturally acquire the knowledge and skills associated with the communities of academic practice concerned with these fields of inquiry.

As a new approach, this dialogic form of RE responds to what we perceive to be a crisis in the subject. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the multiplicity of theories, definitions and dimensions of religion which have been posited, theological and religious studies have become heterogeneous multidisciplinary fields of study, utilising the insights of countless philosophical and theoretical frameworks. This disciplinary and theoretical complexity has been transmitted to the

RE classroom through a plethora of pedagogies propounded by educational theorists, such as those who contributed to Grimmitt's textbook (2000), which includes, for example, phenomenological, experiential, interpretive, theological, critical realist, narrative and constructivist approaches. For some, these competing pedagogies are founded upon incommensurable assumptions about the nature of religion, what we can know about it and how we should study it. Thus, it would be inappropriate for teachers to adopt more than one as they are based on irreconcilably different philosophical traditions. For others, these pedagogies are complementary and can be used simultaneously or successively simply by divorcing the methods from the methodologies and pragmatically applying which ever approach is most suitable, bearing in mind the nature of the subject content and the intended learning outcomes.

We think that, if the chosen pedagogical approach and its underlying theoretical assumptions matter so much, then pupils should be taught why. The assumptions underlying the methodologies and methods of theological and religious studies should be explicit matters for discussion with pupils rather than embodied in pedagogies predetermined outside of the classroom by theorists, curriculum designers and teachers. Therefore, the induction of pupils into the communities of academic practice concerned with theological and religious studies through RE should include not only learning about religion(s), but also learning how to learn about religion(s). RE should not be characterised by the transmission of a body of religious knowledge according to one or other pedagogy, but a dialogue about (i) the nature of that knowledge and the reality to which it pertains, (ii) the methodologies and methods by which the knowledge was produced, and (iii) the skills and dispositions needed by knowledge-producers. In such an approach, pupils can be reconceived as joint researchers working alongside teachers to investigate the effectiveness of different methods of studying religion(s). This pedagogy is not a Trojan horse by which a particular set of theoretical or disciplinary assumptions are smuggled into the classroom, but is itself open to being dissected and opened up for critical analysis and evaluation.

#### A work-in-progress

By getting pupils to discuss religious subject content in relation to the 'RE-searchers' described above, we have found a practical and successful way of implementing our dialogic theory of RE in one primary school. Of course this is still a 'work-in-progress'. Do we need, for example, a 'Dig-it-up Darcy' to represent archaeological studies, a 'Read-between-the-lines Ruth' to represent literary analysis, or a 'Tear-it-apart Tony' to represent Deconstructionism? Also, we need to consider progression issues and whether we need the research knowledge, skills and dispositions of our characters to develop across the primary phase parallel to those of the pupils and to enable appropriate differentiation to occur. Undoubtedly, there is a lot to do, but we have made our first steps and, if you think

that there is value in this approach and want to join us, then please contact us using the email addresses below.

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***‘Schools are fascinating and busy places and there is much that happens in them that is very funny and sometimes absurd. One of the sadder aspects of recent years is that teachers and others who work in schools seem to have less time to laugh with the children and each other at some of the amusing things that happen. Childhood should be joyous and schools should feel part of that happy outlook.’***

**Mick Waters, *Thinking Allowed on Schooling* (2013)**

***‘At precisely the moment that we need them most, we are losing the vocabulary, concepts and narratives that are necessary to talk intelligently about religion.’***

**Grace Davie, *Westminster Debates*, May 2012**