

WHAT ROLE CAN DIFFERENT DISCIPLINARY KNOWLEDGES PLAY IN SHAPING RE?



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This project is being funded by Templeton World Charity Foundation as part of a wider scheme of research titled Big Questions in Classrooms.

Although studies have explored school pupils' attitudes concerning science and religion, there has been little research on beginning teachers' experiences in their development and formation and not much is known about how big questions are framed in classrooms or the extent of teachers' experiences of the science/religion encounter. This project addresses the gap, develops informed responses for teacher education and finds some preliminary understandings of the impact of the use of that knowledge in teacher education programmes.

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TEMPLETON WORLD
CHARITY FOUNDATION



BIG QUESTIONS
in CLASSROOMS

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Science Religion Encounters Toolkit 5

INTRODUCTION

Within cohorts of student RE teachers, we found evidence of debates about the value of different disciplinary knowledges underpinning the purpose of RE as a school subject.

This toolkit explores how different disciplinary lenses might be used in RE lessons.

TASK 1



Introducing the data 3 reflections from teachers

Three student RE teachers, in quick succession, expressed three rather different answers in response to a question about the purpose of RE and science on the school curriculum. The focus group took place in 2020.

- Which do you sympathise with? Why?
- Is it possible or preferable for Jenny and Ralph's approaches to co-exist within a successful RE department?

1. JENNY

For me, I definitely believe in the psychological concept of the reflex itself and I think RE is aiming towards that, whereby pupils will learn about themselves through the lens of other people. I am definitely very passionate about helping teenagers on that journey of self-discovery where when being a teenager is one of the worst times for your self-esteem of your self-identity and I think RE should [support] that ... People who understand science are very intellectual because they know so much about life... Actually you can manipulate that and find out so much more. So if RE is inward then Science is outward I guess, is my answer.

- Do you sympathise with Jenny's words?
- Why?

Thought: *This could be characterised as a reflective or psychological or spiritual understanding of the subject space. One which is about an inner meaningfulness and significance, a space for self-understanding.*

2. RALPH

I think that fundamentally it's Religious Education so half of it is learning about religions. But I think, for me, more importantly is developing the self and teaching of pupils how to critically engage with their own beliefs and material. It's not so much about making conformists or making them sort of enjoy Islam, Christianity, Judaism. ... It's not about telling them what they can or can't like or should like. It's just about giving them the tools for proper intellectual enquiry so to speak ... So critical thinking, sort of looking at premises, looking at evidence, looking at how a logical argument is formed and how the premises interlink. What is sufficient evidence. What isn't.

- **Do you sympathise with Ralph's words? Why?**
- **Is it possible or preferable for Jenny and Ralph's approaches to co-exist within a successful RE department?**

Thought: *Here there is a strong emphasis on a more conceptual and philosophical shape of the subject, which leads to a student better at intellectual enquiry, with better logical argumentation, which the student teacher sees as in the service of examining their own beliefs and the subject's content.*

3. SOPHIE

Well, to be honest, it's quite difficult. I'll have to shy away from what these two are arguing about purely because I don't know where I personally stand on it and that's going back to what I believe about how can we know? Who can be right? Some people, probably Ralph, would probably see this as shying away from the truth, not dealing with uncomfortable things and not actually dealing with the fact that some things may be completely true, like God is their future kind of thing, but in my mind I just feel like I want to bring these two together and be like "You're both right", I don't know.

- **Do you sympathise with Sophie's words?**
- **Why?**

Commentator: *This student teacher offers a reflection about the preceding views and the difficulty of determining which is better if indeed one is. The student seeks to synthesise the two strands.*

TASK 2



Adapt a lesson: Making progress with disciplinary knowledge

1. Take a lesson you need to teach and identify the particular discipline(s) at the heart of the lesson.
2. How does the lesson focus/question make the disciplinary knowledge explicit?
3. What steps are you building into the lesson to help pupils make progress in that form of disciplinary knowledge?
4. How are you being explicit about the 'way of knowing' within that particular discipline? For example, in broad terms:
 1. If you are working to thinking like a philosopher then the steps may be in terms of philosophical argument building and analysis.
 2. If it is thinking like a theologian then the steps may involve sacred text reading and theological reflection on the meanings and applications of those texts.
 3. If it is thinking like a social scientist then the steps may involve listening to and interpreting an interview with a religious person, or reading statistical information, and questioning what those data might mean for the participants and the reader.

Some textbooks explicitly encourage this. See <https://educationblog.oup.com/secondary/re/re-encourage-and-track-student-progression>

TASK 3



Examine three units of work

1. Take three units of work that you currently teach or plan to teach one each from Year 7, Year 9 and Year 11.
2. What expectation is built into these units for pupils to make progress in their disciplinary understanding across their time in school?
3. How is this clearly marked in the unit of work?
4. Does it relate to the Department's shared vision and aim for the subject?
5. How is progression indicated? For instance
 1. are there increasing expectations of how sacred texts are engaged in student writing?
 2. how is the work of the scholarship that informs the disciplinary approach introduced and developed over time?
 3. how do the discipline-related activities and tasks expect more complex responses from students over time?

TASK 4



Curriculum conversation

If the RE department is planning interdisciplinary or collaborative work with the science department, then it is worth being precise about which disciplines are coming together.

Is the planned sequence of lessons bringing physics and theology together, or biology and ethics, or particular forms of argument and explorations of evidence in perhaps philosophy and geology?

Plan for a curriculum conversation with a science teacher and think about how pupils might benefit from explicit teaching about different ways of knowing in the disciplines of science and RE.

Find a member of the science department for a friendly conversation.

You might want to give them these themes to consider in advance of the conversation

- How do students make progress in science?
- Does that differ across the different disciplines of physics, chemistry etc.
- How are words such as evidence, theory, proof used in science lessons? In what year groups are they explicitly discussed?
- What might 'ways of knowing' mean in a science context? Are there different ways of knowing across the different disciplines? How might they compare to the different ways of knowing across the different disciplines in RE?
- How might pupils benefit from being taught explicitly about different ways of knowing in different disciplines?
- Are the limitations of knowledge ever discussed in science lessons?

RESEARCH SUMMARY

Research Summary 4: A summary and elaboration of the discussion around 'Ways of Knowing' in the Ofsted Research Review: Religious Education (2021)

All quotes are taken from the full document which can be read here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-review-series-religious-education>

The Ofsted review for Religious Education unpacked the phrase 'Ways of knowing' as about being scholarly in RE, which means being scholarly about the substantive content and the disciplinary concepts. Education includes teaching pupils the (substantive) knowledge of things and the (disciplinary) knowledge of ways of finding things out.

Pupils explore the knowledge in a lesson in different ways:

- The disciplinary ways of finding out: well-established methods and processes and other tools of scholarship that are used to study and make sense of global and historical religion/non-religion
- The nature of disciplinary scholar debate: the types of conversation (or 'modes of enquiry' or 'scholarly discourses') that academic communities have about religion/non-religion

Ways of knowing mean attending to how things are known as well as what is known. This makes a difference to the tools used to explore that content and can affect the design of activities, tasks and the nature of progression a pupil is hoped to make.

Different disciplines have something to say in RE. Pupils could both learn about these different approaches and how useful they are, and also how to use these approaches themselves. This is important for several reasons, but one is cautionary:

"If the curriculum is not explicit about 'ways of knowing', implicit assumptions (as well as a general lack of clarity) are passed on to pupils about how they ought to approach future RE content. This links to the important question of 'what kind of neutrality' is required in non-confessional RE [given that] a position of absolute neutrality when studying religion/non-religion is considered untenable"

In other words, there is a risk not only of distorting the representation of religion but also imparting an unreasonable presumption of some kind of view from nowhere. The presenting of 'this is how it is' without question. The social sciences arose in part as a rejection to methods of knowledge construction that had been advocated through religious authority and religious scholarship, including rejecting, for instance, things like revelation. Scholars writing in the mystical traditions or religion use language poetically, metaphorically with expressions of ambiguity, rather than the more positivistic language of the natural sciences and analytical philosophy. Zen thinking has a strong tradition of embracing contradiction in the way of making sense that it advocates.

The review recommends that leaders and teachers may plan for pupils to learn:

- “how knowledge came about (for example, who constructed the knowledge or how it might have been formed from academic disciplines)
- the status of claims (for example, how accurate a generalisation about religion might be)
- the difference between conceptions and misconceptions (for example, whether the term ‘believer’ is an appropriate term for all adherents and practitioners of different traditions)
- the type of method that may have been used to derive that knowledge and the suitability of methods (for example, the strengths and limitations of interview methods for portions of curriculum content)”

In Ofsted’s view of a knowledge rich RE curriculum, it is not enough that pupils learn things, the substantive knowledge of what happens on Hajj or the domestic religious life of Hindus. Also pupils are expected to know about how that stuff came to be established, organised, classified and analysed and evaluated.

Knowing about scholarship, disciplines and knowledge production

Classically, religion is approached through three groups of disciplines: the most recent being the social sciences, the most ancient being theological and philosophical. Within these groups there are intellectual conversations taking place that are characterised by the disciplines. What might it mean for pupils to encounter what it is to think like a social scientist about religion, or think like a theologian or think like a philosopher?

1. When asking what is known about belief, a social scientist might conduct surveys of people using techniques that try to make sense of the different beliefs people has. This involves skills in conceptual clarity in the language used, techniques of asking questions and eliciting meaningful, reliable answers. Pupils could be introduced to survey data of populations about their beliefs, or an interview with someone about their belief. They could be taught how to use such data in a discussion and how they might respond to it or ask questions of how it has been gathered.
2. Pupils might explore the how of theological reflection, relating ideas in sacred texts that have developed into living conversations among the faithful, in history and the present time. For example, how the Titles of Jesus found in the Bible texts informed debates in the Early Church around the nature of Jesus, how answers to those debates shaped religious thought and latterly how this is expressed in credal statements and contemporary religious practices. This would mean introducing pupils to the process of theological reflection, asking questions of sacred text, examining different responses to those texts and contextualising texts in ancient and modern religious life.
3. A third form of disciplinary how offered through philosophical tools that investigate meaning. How philosophers ask ultimate questions and seek to find answers using a process of reasoning and conceptual clarification, seeking out inconsistencies, reliable arguments, and counter arguments.

These are general disciplinary categories that themselves can be divided. Theologians divide into groups such as those focussed on Biblical interpretation, historical theology or pastoral theology for instance. Likewise, Philosophers can be from the analytic school of philosophy, continental philosophy, Chinese or east Asian philosophies, for instance. And whilst some social scientist work on improve statistical analysis, others are interested in ethnography, others social theory for instance.

Therefore, the possible tools and methods that pupils could learn about in a lesson include:

- tools for interpreting texts
- tools for exploring customs, habits and ways of living (ethnography)
- archaeological procedures
- methods in historical reconstruction
- participant observation
- in-depth interviews
- analysis of relevant data
- conceptual analysis
- reflective analysis

Ofsted write that this kind of knowledge develops pupils' awareness that different methods and processes are useful in different ways and that their awareness that

“conversations about religion and non-religion generally carry within them certain assumptions, link to methods and processes and contain certain criteria about what is considered valuable.”

Ofsted state that “to meet the professional standards of teachers, teachers must promote the value of scholarship” and so curriculum design should: value scholarship, include how the knowledge was constructed; explore how accurate, tentative or reliable representations of religious and non-religious traditions are; have expectations of what pupils to learn about how to construct new knowledge, and evaluate existing knowledge, in trustworthy ways. Pupils should therefore be learning things like:

- What happens in sacred text interpretation?
- What does theological reflection look like?
- What constitutes a strong philosophical argument?
- What is a rigorous assessment of current religious belief and practice?

Ofsted state that “High-quality RE curriculums build forms of knowledge that give pupils the capacity to think about the status of the content.” In being more focussed on the disciplinary knowledge lessons can more sharply focus on the kind of analysis taking place when the focus of analysis is, for instance, a belief, a religious text or a philosophical argument. The kind of criticality is shaped by the kind of analysis so subject leaders should plan ways of learning that are specific to the content.

For example, curricula that refer to and use sacred texts such as the Bible should consider the interpretative (hermeneutical) tools for texts in the RE classroom. Pupils would learn the tools of interpretation that are specific to the substantive content (parts of the sacred text), seeing layers of meaning in texts that interpreters find significant. This grows their capacity to become less reliant on teachers delivery of a meaning and brings them closer to the kind of analysis that both Biblical scholars and Christians participating in Bible Study today practice.

“High-quality curriculums in which pupils learn a range of ‘ways of knowing’ can help prevent over-simplifying or stereotyping religion. Recognising that there can be different ‘ways of knowing’ brings to light a variety of perspectives, positions and voices. This may also help overcome misconceptions that later ideas, practices and perspectives in some religious traditions are necessarily deviations from an original pure tradition.”

TASK 6

Other Research and Resources

The **Ofsted subject review for Religious Education** refers to pupils learning about substantive knowledge, disciplinary knowledge and personal knowledge.

1. Substantive knowledge about various religious and non-religious traditions;
 2. Disciplinary knowledge (different ‘ways of knowing’) that enables pupils to understand and use some of the methods and techniques associated with studying religious and non-religious traditions;
 3. Personal knowledge that enables pupils to better understand and interrogate their own position, presuppositions and values. (From a handy summary published here by Diocese of St Albans)
- <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-review-series-religious-education/research-review-series-religious-education>

‘Educating teachers to teach a subject with agreed limits and defined kinds of knowing’, 25 March 2019, Professor Bob Bowie

- <https://www.reonline.org.uk/2019/03/25/educating-teachers-to-teach-a-subject-with-agreed-limits-and-defined-kinds-of-knowing-bob-bowie/>

Consider reframing your questions to emphasise disciplinary knowledge development. See this blog showing how the framing of questions asked in RE lessons says something about the kind of disciplinary knowledge being built.

Jo Pearce, Alexis Stones, Michael J. Reiss & Tamjid Mujtaba (2021) ‘Science is purely about the truth so I don’t think you could compare it to non-truth versus the truth.’ Students’ perceptions of religion and science, and the relationship(s) between them: religious education and the need for epistemic literacy., *British Journal of Religious Education*, 43:2, 174-189, DOI: 10.1080/01416200.2019.1635434

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