

The RE-searchers: Promoting Methodologically-orientated RE in Primary Schools

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Introduction

We are developing an approach to RE which foregrounds methodological issues associated with the study of religion(s). We believe RE should provide an initiation into the discourses associated with the communities of academic practice concerned with theological and religious studies. This entails not only learning about religion(s), but also learning how to learn about religion(s). Our approach encourages pupils to think about the significance, and evaluate the effectiveness, of different methods of enquiry. To make research methodologies tangible to young children, we have personified some of them as cartoon character superheroes. Individually they are called Know-it-all Nicky, Debate-it-all Derek, Ask-it-all Ava and Have-a-go Hugo, but collectively they're known as the 'RE-searchers'. Each character holds different assumptions about religion(s) and advocates different research methods (e.g. observing and recording, questioning and arguing, interviewing and empathizing, and participating and experiencing). Like the methodologies they represent, each superhero has different strengths and weaknesses. Once acquainted with our characters and their respective characteristics as researchers, pupils can metaphorically call upon them or assume their identities in pursuit of different understandings of religion(s). The theory underpinning our approach, and the profiles and illustrations of the RE-searchers, can be found in Freathy and Freathy (2013 and 2014). (Contact us if you have trouble locating these articles.) Here we share some practical examples of how we have worked with the RE-searchers to promote methodologically-orientated RE.

Using puppets

When introducing pupils to the RE-searchers, we have experimented with a range of strategies. We have told them about the values and research preferences of each superhero. We have shown them cartoon strips of the RE-searchers undertaking their preferred modes of enquiry. We have also given them the opportunity to learn in the style of each RE-searcher, and assessed their role-playing according to character-specific criteria. Most recently, we have used a hand-puppet, operated and voiced by the teacher, to explore each RE-searcher's approach in turn. The puppet was used to portray a fictional pupil demonstrating to the other pupils how to play the role of one of the RE-searchers. In the ensuing role-play, the 'real pupils' could identify with the 'puppet pupil', learning from his successes and failures in attempting to complete the task, and empathizing with his sometimes anxious, questioning or hesitant commentary. During the process, the teacher flitted between (i) being the puppeteer controlling and voicing the role-playing puppet, (ii) evaluating the puppet's performance from the perspective of someone like a 'theatre critic', that is, bearing in mind how well the puppet's words and deeds cohered with the 'character description', 'script' and 'director's notes', and (iii) engaging the pupils in critical dialogue about what the puppet was doing and why. Thereby, the teacher modelled the way in which pupils might immerse themselves in the role of a RE-searcher, whilst continuing to

evaluate the character's values and research preferences, and critiquing their own role-playing performances. Although it sounds complicated, the approach has been really successful. We are looking into other ways of using puppets to represent different voices in dialogue about religion(s) and to stimulate metacognition and self-regulation. There are, for example, a number of free 'apps' for smartphones and tablets which could be used (e.g. Puppetpal and Morpho).

Getting into role

Pupils sometimes struggle to remember the RE-searcher character profiles. What are their values and assumptions? What methods of enquiry do they prefer and why? On occasions, they also forget that they are meant to be in role or indeed which RE-searcher they are supposed to be role-playing. We have experimented with a variety of ways of getting pupils into role, for example:

- *RE-searcher Table Mats*: table-top aide memoires of RE-searcher profiles;
- *RE-searcher Badges*: role-reminders and indicators of when pupils are 'in-character';
- *RE-searcher Fan Key-rings*: one key-ring per RE-searcher, consisting of a series of fanned segments, including the values, assumptions, interests and research preferences of each character, as well as sentence starters and question templates; and
- *RE-searcher Question Maker Grids*: mix-and-match question openers across the top of the grid (e.g. 'when', 'why', 'what', etc.), and areas of research interests for each RE-searcher down the side, generating a space for questions or answers in the box where column and row coincide.

Promoting methodologically-orientated dialogue

How have we prevented our approach from becoming a patch-work quilt of discrete and contrasting learning experiences, and instead ensured it contributes to an on-going and overarching dialogue about the methodologies used in the study of religion(s)? So far, we have:

- undertaken incidental/continuous questioning of individuals, pairs, groups and/or the whole class concerning the success of a given research method during and/or immediately after tasks;
- asked the pupils to undertake end of lesson Self Assessments (SA), reviewing their performance with regard to a given method, and Method Assessments (MA), reviewing the effectiveness of the method;
- designed a unit of work around a single research question, deploying various methodological approaches, and concluding with a standalone lesson to evaluate the effectiveness of each methodology in answering the question;
- designed smaller-scale investigations in which pupils undertake enquiries to answer specific questions, and along the way, construct hypotheses, complete wider reading, select and justify methods of enquiry, collect, analyze and discuss their findings, and make conclusions with regard to the research question and their hypotheses; and
- undertaken 'Multi-voice Marking' in which pupils get one comment from the teacher and one comment from a RE-searcher.

This final strategy requires the pupils to stick a cartoon of the relevant RE-searcher, accompanied by an empty speech bubble, at the end of their piece of work. When marking, the teacher writes a comment from themselves and a comment from the RE-searcher. The RE-searcher can comment on the pupil's work or on the teacher's comment. Equally the teacher can comment on the pupil's work or on the RE-searcher's comment. The pupils are then invited to write a response to the teacher's comment, the RE-searcher's comment, or both. Once again, the onus is placed on the teacher presenting different perspectives and vocalizing different voices. We have found this an invaluable tool in drawing pupils into dialogue. Furthermore, these acts of ventriloquism, in which teachers throw their voices into the characters of puppets or cartoon superheroes can enable them to be more direct in challenging pupils' thinking, without necessarily invoking the emotions usually associated with teacher criticism or disapproval.

Conclusion

From our experience, the utilization of the RE-searchers approach gives pupils a high-quality and first-hand experience of what it means to study religion(s). The application of the methodological values and preferences of the RE-searchers, and the focus on enquiry-based learning, provide lessons and units of work with an internal consistency and coherence. The opportunity for the teacher to work alongside pupils, evaluating the success of different methods of enquiry, depersonalizes any criticisms or concerns the pupils may have of the teaching and learning that has occurred, and encourages them to work collaboratively to improve the learning experience. Similarly, the ability of pupils and teachers to step in and out of role, to reflect on the reasons for the success or failure of different approaches, affords the possibility of forging closer relationships based on a greater understanding of each other's own values and preferences as budding and more mature researchers of religion(s) respectively. Pupils participate in activities through role-play that they would not have engaged in as themselves. In addition, when in role, they are more willing to condemn or condone what they are experiencing without fear of teacher or peer group censure. Overall, they appreciate being treated as co-researchers, accruing subject knowledge through genuine and direct encounters with religious phenomena, and through their engagement with the RE-searcher characters, learning something of the extent to which worldviews and methodologies influence perceptions of religion(s).

If our approach appeals to you and you want to be involved in trialing existing materials or generating new ones, please email gilesfreathy@hotmail.com or follow him on Twitter @gilesfreathy.

References

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