Making a Difference in the Religious Education classroom: integrating theory and practice in teachers' professional learning.

Abstract

Systematic reviews and meta-analyses of the research literature on Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and School Improvement demonstrate that teachers who have the opportunity to develop 'knowledge *of* practice' by integrating theory and practice have a positive impact on student attainment. It is argued in this article that we have sufficient weight of evidence to indicate that engaging in curriculum development as a participant in a community of inquiry is the optimal context for professional learning to develop knowledge *of* practice. However, establishing participation in communities of inquiry as integral to teachers' professional learning remains a challenge and we need better ways of sharing and interrogating what we (think) we know. Examples of 'experiments in practice' to promote professional learning and make a difference in the RE classroom, are used to indicate what has worked and what hasn't and what we might do next.

Key words

Professional learning; community of inquiry; curriculum development

Being Professional

Defining what is means to be professional is surprisingly difficult despite the increase in the number of occupations classed as professions since the 19th century. What being professional means is often more readily conveyed by antonyms such as 'amateur' or 'incompetent' and sociologists studying the rise of professionalism have yet to reach agreement on definitions for cognate terms such as profession, professional, professionalism and professionalization. Essentialist perspectives seeking a Weberian 'ideal type' of a profession focus on characteristics such as the command of a specialist body of knowledge that is applied in the practice of

its members, the autonomy to exercise judgement in the regulation of activity and the status it is ascribed by society. From the 1970s, there has been an increase in competition between occupational groups to achieve recognition as a profession and this 'professional project' (Larson, 1977) has shifted attention from identifying the core qualities of established professions, such as medicine, towards the processes by which occupational groups attempt to realise their ambitions. Pursuit of the professional project emphasises the specialist knowledge that membership of an occupational group requires, how it is acquired and how it is accredited (Collins, 1979). Wilson (1983) developed the concept of 'cognitive authority' to indicate the negotiated, as opposed to inherent, quality of the specialist knowledge to which aspirants to professional status lay claim:

What one needs to know also depends in part on what others expect one to know (Wilson, 1983: p. 150).

Attempts to secure the professional status of teachers have been particularly susceptible to the influence of cognitive authority mediated through public perceptions of what the activity of teaching involves and, therefore, what teachers need to understand, know and be able to do (Zeichner, 2015). Hargreaves and Goodson (1996) argue that efforts to improve the status of teachers, by quantifying and codifying their professional knowledge to demonstrate a level of scientific certainty, has reduced teaching to set of technical standards at the expense of other important qualities. Balancing claims to the possession of a rigorous and robust scientific knowledge base with the contextual, emotional, reflexive and iterative elements of teaching (Mockler, 2005) remains a challenging and often contradictory process so that professionalization does not always result in professionalism (Hargreaves, 2000:152)

Establishing a claim to a distinctive body of professional knowledge is complex because teachers work in two knowledge building communities simultaneously: they work with the subject content to build their students understanding of the world; and with other practitioners to develop an understanding of pedagogy (Bereiter, 2002). In both communities there is

also a requirement to engage with research to access what is already known and, therefore, the risk of opening up a gap between theory and practice by trying to apply 'facts' about effective teaching uncritically (Hargreaves, 2000). Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) address the relationship between theory and practice by proposing three forms of teacher knowledge: teachers access research knowledge *for* practice and they develop experiential knowledge *in* practice but it is the integrative knowledge *of* practice they acquire through systematic, classroom-based inquiry that can endorse claims that teaching is a profession. The two knowledge-building communities in which teachers work intersect in the activity of interpreting the curriculum in the classroom and is the reason why contestation of the school curriculum is frequently the site of battles to define the nature of teacher professionalism (McCulloch et al., 2000). The crucial role of responsibility for the interpretation of the curriculum, frequently expressed in the UK context as 'curriculum development', in forging the professional identity of teachers is recognised by researchers (Howells, 2003) and teacher unions (ATL, 2012). It is argued in this article that the most fruitful context for integrative knowledge *of* practice is the opportunity to pursue professional learning through practitioner inquiry stimulated by participation in curriculum development.

Theory and Practice in Professional Learning: back to the future?

At the beginning of the twentieth century the American educationalist John Dewey identifies the tension between theory and practice as both inevitable and a positive force for professional learning, provided their interaction is mutual and fortifying (Dewey, 1904). Dewey advocated a 'laboratory' approach to learning in the classroom, whereby the task of the teacher is to work with the interest of the learner and make connections between their experience and the curriculum that encourage sustained interaction. The laboratory approach is experimental, requiring the teacher to exercise local, situated judgement to connect particular instances that occur in the classroom with general principles through a process Dewey describes as 'psychologising the subject'. He considers such an approach to be preferable to the dominant 'apprenticeship' model of learning by copying as, regardless of the merits of what is imitated; it does not stimulate the development of the

intellectual processes necessary for the interaction of theory and practice in real life, authentic situations. It is by inquiry into the testing of ideas in action in the classroom that teachers are able to generate the 'narratives of practice' that form a body of professional knowledge. The classroom as a 'laboratory' enables the teacher to develop deep professional learning through the study of theory-in-practice dedicated to the understanding of a theory-for-practice (Shulman, 1998) in a mutually fortifying interaction.

Towards the end of the century, educational researchers in the UK such as Edgar Stones and Lawrence Stenhouse, also emphasised the importance of establishing a dynamic and productive relationship between theory and practice in teachers' professional development. For Stones, 'the proof of the theory is in the teaching' (Stones, 1986: 175) and so the teacher should be recognised as being simultaneously both a theorist and a practitioner. If teachers are to fulfil this role, they require knowledge of the principles of the psychology of learning as they might relate to practical teaching and should be equipped plan and appraise what they do in the classroom through a process of 'investigative pedagogy'. The process of pedagogical thought and experimentation through which teachers would then develop their expertise has features in common with Dewey's concept of 'psychologising the subject' through the generation of 'narratives of practice'.

Stenhouse emphasised the function of the curriculum as a statement of what society has decided it is important to know but which, as it must be enacted in the process of learning and teaching, requires the, 'disciplining of all ideas by the problems of practice' (Stenhouse, 1980:96). Collaboration between academics and teachers is required so that ideas about what is to be taught are treated as intelligent proposals to be tested in action in the classroom (Stenhouse, 1975). In this way, focusing on the curriculum as a process rather than a set of predetermined outcomes creates equality between academic knowledge and the knowledge of teachers and a fruitful context for the interaction of theory and practice in professional learning is established. Stenhouse's approach makes demands on teachers, who must be prepared to articulate and share what they learn, with each other and with the wider educational community, in order to build a robust body of professional knowledge:

… which is founded in curiosity and a desire to understand; which is stable, not fleeting, systematic in the sense of being sustained by a strategy. (Stenhouse, 1995:1)

By the end of the 1990's converging trends affecting policy and practice in the initial and continuing education of teachers in England changed the relationship between schools and universities. Provision for Initial Teacher Education increasing the time students spent in classrooms and the opening up of school-based routes into teaching resulted in a complex situation affording both opportunities and challenges for the realisation of the integration of theory and practice in professional learning. In 1997, the Teacher Training Agency (TTA) in the UK launched the School-Based Research Consortia (SBRC) initiative, a three-year 'experiment in practice' (Baumfield, 2015) to explore the potential to develop new forms of collaborative partnership between schools and universities. The North East School-Based Research Consortium (NESBRC), one of four funded projects, was the context for an early attempt to build upon the work of Dewey, Stones and Stenhouse to promote integrative knowledge *of* practice with teachers of Religious Education and led to the publication of 'Thinking through Religious Education' (Baumfield, 2002).

Thinking through Religious Education: learning from an experiment in practice

The NESBRC took propositions from research into metacognition about the benefits of infusing thinking skills strategies into the curriculum and tested them in action in the RE classroom. Teachers in each of the six secondary (11-18) schools in the project were invited to select a strategy, integrate it into a topic in the syllabus and evaluate its impact in the classroom. The strategies were assembled from a range of sources, published programmes for critical thinking, generic strategies for promoting understanding, and some we invented ourselves. Working collaboratively we then adapted, tested and refined their use and produced resources with accounts of the process to share with each other, more widely through subject networks and in publications. The resources were well received and we began to see how the strategies not only stimulated the students' thinking but

also functioned as powerful tools for professional learning. The crucial process element of the strategies we developed for 'Thinking through RE' is the immediate, context-specific and highly relevant feed-back from learners they elicit and which has the potency to stimulate teacher inquiry (see Baumfield et al., 2009 for a fuller explanation of the role of the strategies as tools for inquiry). The experience of the teachers in the NESBRC and the wider RE subject network was confirmed by a systematic review of research into the effect of thinking skills interventions on teachers (Baumfield et al., 2005). Studies included in this review demonstrate a link between encouraging pupil inquiry and the growth in the capacity of teachers to think critically about learning processes in the classroom. The capacity for interventions designed to have a particular impact on pupils to have the same effect on their teachers has been described as a 'mirror effect' (Wikeley, 2000) and is consistent with research on the importance of student feedback for professional learning (Watkins, 2000). Improved access to student feedback using tools for inquiry creates 'positive dissonance', the disruption of the teacher's anticipation of how the learner will respond that exceeds expectations of their potential, and so stimulates interest in developing professional knowledge (Baumfield, 2006). Stimulation of interest may be necessary but it is not a sufficient condition for securing generative and sustained change, as researchers in the US have found. The Cognitively Guided Instruction project identified the importance of close collaboration between teachers and researchers within a critical community to ensure transformational professional learning (Franke et al., 1998).

In 2014 the Research Councils of the UK commissioned a review of research into School-University Partnerships:

…to explore the potential for an ongoing programme of work aimed at enhancing the quality and impact of school-university partnerships.
(Greany et al., 2014:4)

The review confirmed that there is sufficient evidence to support the claim that school-university partnerships can contribute to the formation of communities of inquiry in which researchers and practitioners share responsibility in the production of knowledge that makes a difference to teaching and learning in the classroom. Yet, despite this weight of evidence, establishing participation

in communities of inquiry as integral to teachers' professional learning remains a challenge and much of what we know now was already known over a century ago. Zeichner (2003) comments on the confusion and imprecision in the use of terms such as 'partnership', 'communities of practice', 'professional learning communities' and 'communities of inquiry', which, combined with a lack of fine-grained detail about their activities, make it difficult to identify and replicate the conditions necessary for transformative professional development. Clearly, we need better ways of sharing and interrogating what we (think) we know.

Sharing Narratives of Practice in RE

The somewhat dispersed and occasionally isolated, classroom teachers of RE in the UK are able to draw upon well-established 'guild expertise' through networks linking deliberative local and national bodies with an interest in promoting the exchange of ideas and perspectives on religion and education (Conroy et al., 2013). The small and fragile world of the religious educator encourages people to work together, opening up opportunities to develop and share narratives of practice across institutional boundaries. We have much to learn from the examples we already have of experiments in practice that promote transformative professional learning and make a difference in the RE classroom.

The Westhill Endowment Trust has, since 2004, funded a series of two-day residential seminars to encourage dialogue between researchers, local authority advisers and teachers on a topic relevant to current practice in RE. The Westhill Seminars promote an inclusive ethos through a combination of short 'provocations' from academics or teachers and responses developed in group discussions; follow-up questionnaire and interviews with participants, found that

…the seminars influenced pupils in schools and professionals; the publications from the seminars had a distinctive influence, and spending time to think and discuss about religious education was at least as influential as the presentations by researchers. (Stern, 2014: 18).

Participation changed perceptions of what counted as research, replacing conventional views that it sounds a bit 'PhD-ish' with the realisation that all teachers are involved in research when they inquire into their practice:

I have become more aware of the significance of the small-scale research that I have been developing over many years…(Stern, 2014: 31).

Two recent research projects in RE have incorporated a collaborative school-university strand of inquiry. The European Commission-funded 'Religion in Education: A Contributor to Dialogue or a Factor of Conflict in Transforming Societies of European Countries?' (REDCo) project funded teachers and researchers to form communities of practice. The communities of practice were funded for three years and participants met regularly to share their experiences of using the interpretive approach to RE (Jackson, 1997) in the classroom to address the themes of the wider REDCo project (Ipgrave et al., 2009). Rather than develop tools for inquiry the REDCo communities of practice used action research methods to evaluate an established approach to teaching RE, and one in which the project as a whole was already heavily invested. The conclusions drawn from the experiences of the participants suggest that perhaps the communities of practice fell short of creating a sufficiently dynamic interaction of theory and practice to sustain transformative professional learning:

The implications for the development of professional knowledge are that teachers and other professionals can benefit from participation in action research communities of practice, under certain conditions. Action research should be an ongoing reconstruction of teachers' theorising of their purposes and practices in the light of reflection on teaching. Community of practice involvement can prevent this theorising from becoming naive or isolated, especially when the community of practice does not rely too heavily on its own situated learning but engages with wider traditions and debates. (O'Grady, 2011:198)

The 'Does RE work?' project, part of the Religion and Society Programme jointly funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), investigated the complex trajectories of the social and pedagogical practices of RE in secondary schools from its aims, through its enaction in the classroom to its outcomes (Conroy et al., 2013). Despite good intentions, maintaining the momentum of the inquiries amongst a geographically dispersed group of teachers was difficult and the attrition rate was high suggesting that belonging

to a community of inquiry is paramount and cannot be manufactured as an auxiliary to a research project.

One of the most recent experiments in practice to promote professional learning by engaging researchers, teachers and their students in dialogue about learning in the RE classroom is 'RE-searchers' developed through the collaboration of a classroom teacher and a university-based educational researcher. Using cartoon characters as tools for inquiry 'RE-searchers' invites primary school (5-11) children to become members of a community of inquiry in which the knowledge and skills associated with different forms of academic practice in RE are,

…explicit matters for discussion with pupils rather than embodied in pedagogies pre-determined outside of the classroom by theorists, curriculum designers and teachers. (Freathy and Freathy, 2013)

The different methodologies and methods of theological and religious studies become the focus of research in the classroom using four cartoon characters, Know-it-all Nicky, Debate-it-all Derek, Ask-it-all Ava and Have-a-go Hugo, loosely based on pedagogical approaches in RE. The students become co-inquirers with their teacher as the disciplinary and theoretical complexity of the different assumptions underlying debates in RE are explored through the different perspectives represented in the cartoons.   'RE-searchers' provides tools to enable the pursuit of learning to be sustained through the mutual and fortifying interaction of theory and practice. We can see how inquiry in the classroom can create a virtuous circle in which the transaction of learning with their students can stimulate teachers' professional learning. We can also see the potential to participate in a community of inquiry beyond the classroom. It would seem that finding ways of sharing and interrogating the narratives of practice generated by 'RE-searchers' as it develops is a good 'bet'[1] if we want to understand transformative professional learning in RE.

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[1] Michael Bassey used the term 'Best Estimate of Trustworthiness' (Bet) in his address at the ESRC Teaching and Learning Programme's inaugural conference in 2003 to describe how research knowledge can be transformed into effective teaching practice through fuzzy generalization. www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/00003143.htm

Making a Difference in the Religious Education classroom

Religious Educators are nothing if not resourceful and we already have a depth of experience on which to draw in order to meet the challenge of developing communities of inquiry to promote professional learning in RE. The RE curriculum is contested and over-burdened with demands to address a range of social issues from obesity to terrorism but it is also less trammelled by close regulation than many other subjects. Locally determined syllabuses for RE offer opportunities for curriculum development and provide scope for teachers to respond creatively to the challenges of 'psychologising the subject'. Participation in a community of inquiry requires a tolerance of ambiguity in order to sustain the tension between theory and practice and not rush to a solution. It also requires genuine uncertainty, otherwise inquiry is at best pointless and possibly deceptive, and the willingness to take risks in order to learn more. In my experience these are all qualities that RE teachers possess in abundance, either because that is what interested them in teaching the subject in the first place or they develop them through their encounters with sceptical students in the classroom.

Although there are grounds for optimism regarding the conditions for transformative professional learning in RE, fundamental problems present obstacles to progress. Foremost amongst these is the fact that not everyone teaching RE in the classroom is qualified in the subject and many teachers lack the confidence to engage students in dialogue about religious ideas in case they reveal their ignorance or cause offence. Another problem arises when teachers, qualified or unqualified, refrain from pushing students beyond the expression of opinions and lose the impetus of inquiry in a facile resolution 'to agree to differ' (Conroy et al., 2012). Negotiating the territory that lies between opposites is a process of constructive doubting rather than superficial agreement. The aim of dialogue is to enable things to be taken apart in order to diagnose what may be wrong; form judgements between competing ideas and to act (Rose, 1992). The rules of engagement for inquiry in the classroom apply equally to the conduct of a community of inquiry for professional learning. The close-knit RE community need to be prepared not only to share but also to *interrogate* our narratives of practice and work

together to make a difference in the RE classroom. Currently, provision for teachers' initial and continuing education is under review across the four devolved nations of the UK (Baumfield, 2012). Reconsidering what and how we can learn about promoting transformative professional learning in RE is, therefore, timely.

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