

Pedagogical bricoleurs and bricolage researchers: The case of Religious Education

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Abstract:

This article reconceptualises school teachers and pupils respectively as ‘pedagogical bricoleurs’ and ‘bricolage researchers’ who utilise a multiplicity of theories, concepts, methodologies and pedagogies in teaching and/or researching. This reconceptualization is based on a coalescence of generic curricular and pedagogical principles promoting dialogic, critical and enquiry-based learning. Innovative proposals for reconceptualising the aims, contents and methods of multi-faith Religious Education in English state-maintained schools without a religious affiliation are described, so as to provide an instance of and occasion for the implications of these theories and concepts of learning. With the aim of initiating pupils into the communities of academic enquiry concerned with theology and religious studies, the ‘RE-searchers approach’ to multi-faith Religious Education in primary schools (5-11 year olds) is cited as a highly innovative means of converting these curricular and pedagogical principles and proposals into practical classroom procedures that are characterised by multi-, inter- and supra-disciplinarity; notions of eclecticism, emergence, flexibility and plurality; and theoretical and conceptual complexity, contestation and context-dependence.

Keywords:

Religious Education, dialogic, critical, enquiry-based, bricolage, RE-searchers.

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The aims, methods and contents of all school curriculum subjects are disputable, but the nature and purpose of Religious Education is especially so, not least because it raises profound ontological and epistemological questions, and potentially divides individuals and communities on the basis of worldviews, philosophies and/or ideologies. For this reason, it provides an ideal context with regard to which the political and practical implications of promoting a dialogic, critical and enquiry-based approach to learning can be discussed. It is argued that such a theoretical framework recognises the inherently contested practice of education as both a transformative and normative process and contributes to wider educational debate.

PART ONE: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Dialogic

In relation to the determination of the contents and methods of politicised and recurrently impugned school curriculum subjects, such as Religious Education, we are drawn to theoretical positions that oppose the notion of singular onto-epistemological foundations, and instead celebrate ontological, epistemological and methodological dynamism, diversity, complexity, contestation, provisionality, flux, fluidity and uncertainty. With this in mind, we find Bakhtin's concept of 'dialogic' to be beneficial because it rejects the monological presentation of a single objective reality from a transcendental perspective, in favour of a plurality of incommensurable beliefs and multitude of contested meanings arising from particular contexts. Thus, the world is deemed irreducible to unity and the transcendence of difference supposed impossible. Two other Bakhtinian concepts are also noteworthy. 'Polyphony' refers to many unmerged and unsubordinated 'sounds, voices, styles, references and assumptions' (Bakhtin, 1992), and 'unfinalizability', refers to the absence of a first or last word in the ongoing, perpetual chain of intertextual meaning that extends into the boundless past and future (Bakhtin, 1986). For Bakhtin, to exist is to engage in unending (trans-)formative dialogue. Contextual and relational, the dialogical word is continuously addressing others and anticipating a response. Consciousness is conceived as a product of unceasing interaction with other consciousnesses. Humanity is thus indeterminate and unfinalizable, although authentic human life is actualised through free discursive acts in open-ended dialogue. This leads to the concept of 'heteroglossia' emphasising that single perspectives are in fact syncretic combinations of a diversity of existing statements, genres, styles and voices (Bakhtin, 1981). Each language-use mediates the relationship between the speaker and the world, both revealing and obscuring aspects of objects of study. An orientation to other discourses, and selective assimilation of other perspectives, creates resonances that make dialogue possible, and when internally persuasive perspectives (as opposed to authoritative perspectives) are accepted actively, independently and responsibly, then the result is self-actualisation and collective realisation.

The classroom constructed in accordance with Bakhtin's perspective is characterised by 'an abundance of dialogue' and co-existing differences, with dialogism representing a 'refusal of closure', opposing fixation on any particular monologue, including those

which promote ‘dominant liberal forms of coexistence and tolerance’ (Robinson, 2011). The ‘dynamic interplay and interruption of perspectives is taken to produce new realities and new ways of seeing’ (Robinson, 2011). Pupils can engage with the polyphonal diversity of dialogues that surround (ultimately unfinalizable) classroom investigations, and thereby form their own perspectives, learning to speak and act, as far as possible, in the absence of an ‘overarching extra-perspectival necessity to which dialogue must be subordinate’ (Robinson, 2011). Thus, there is a need for teaching both *for* and *through* dialogue (Wegerif, 2012) via shared enquiries and exploratory talk that seeks to produce neither a final answer (in absolute terms) nor a dialectical compromise. For Philipson and Wegerif (2017), the absence of consensual criteria for determining certainty does not mean abandoning the aims of acquiring knowledge and/or mastering core concepts through exposure to an inheritance of ways of making sense of the world. It does mean any such encounter should recognise the contingency of perspectives; treat contributions to dialogues - with epistemological humility - as calls for responses rather than ‘final words’; and invite pupils to become active and engaged participants in the dialogue. Thereby the acquisition of knowledge and the development of thinking and learning skills are mutually reinforcing, recognising that knowledge is not indisputable and immutable, but constructed through the implementation of interpretations, methodologies and methods with which pupils can experiment for themselves.

Critical

Alongside dialogic theories, we find critical perspectives to be helpful as a starting point for questioning normalised practice and constantly problematizing the given. Critical pedagogy encourages pupils to think about the processes of education and the politics that surround it; recognise knowledge/power connections; identify and resist attempts by dominant knowledge to colonise their thinking; and develop the critical consciousness and know-how necessary to take action against oppression. For us, this oppression is represented by dominant ontological, epistemological and methodological perspectives that exclude legitimate alternatives and/or fail to engage in critically-reflexive self-examination. For this reason, teachers and pupils should be initiated into hermeneutical and methodological dialogues, so as to enable them ‘to demonstrate at times a critical distance, not only from the objects of its study, but also from the methods of study’ (Freathy, 2015, p. 112). Through practical, participative and inter-active methods, pupils can be taught ‘to look both through and at the epistemological filters’ through which subject matter is studied (Freathy, 2015, p. 112). Thus the mode of interpretation can be made explicit and susceptible to analysis and evaluation, and the knowledge thereby created can be contextualised and understood relationally. Similarly, teachers and pupils can be encouraged to recognise, reflect on, understand and articulate their own worldviews and how these influence, and are influenced by, their teaching and learning. Whilst neutrality may be impossible, it is possible to gain knowledge of one’s own partiality through critical reflection and reflexivity, and of other people’s partiality through genuine dialogue characterised by an attitude of openness and respect (Gadamer, 2004). Thereby pupils can construct themselves as dialogic subjective learners, capable of producing knowledge and making meaning, through critical dialogue and mutuality.

Once the pedagogical has been made consciously political (i.e. once it recognises and illuminates the relationship between power, knowledge and ideology), the curriculum becomes a site of resistance, contestation, agency and challenge, perpetually constructing, deconstructing and reconstructing theories, concepts, methodologies and methods for engaging with subject content. For pupils, classrooms can become places of cultural production, not reproduction, in which they are empowered to make their own sense of the diversity and plurality encountered, and to develop their own voices within communities of enquiry. This includes, self-consciously and self-critically, questioning the nature, content and purpose of their learning; identifying and evaluating the knowledge, skills, attributes and values that they are being taught; and exploring whose representations of the subject matter are (under-)represented in discourses of power and asymmetrical relations of power.

Enquiry-based bricolage

Dialogical and critical theories provide lenses for perceiving the complexity, contestability and context-dependence of curriculum contents and methods, and the need for subjects to become more self-conscious and self-critical of the scope, variety and contingency of the theories, concepts, methodologies and resources they use. It can be argued that the greater the diversity of hermeneutical and methodological approaches, the fuller and rounder the experience of studying will be. A perceived risk might be that this objective wholly or partially supplants the attainment of in-depth subject content knowledge. However, enquiry-based learning can be utilised to allow for engagement with conceptual, theoretical, methodological and epistemological matters concurrent with the in-depth scrutiny of specific objects of study.

In highly contested curriculum areas, and to cohere with the dialogic and critical theories described above, enquiry-based learning should be ‘explicitly based on notions of eclecticism, emergent design, flexibility and plurality’ that are committed to critically examining ‘phenomena from multiple, and sometimes competing, theoretical and methodological perspectives’ (Rogers, 2012, p. 1). It is here that we introduce the concept of the ‘bricoleur’, referring to crafts-people who creatively use available tools and materials to construct new artefacts (Kincheloe, 2001, p. 680). In contrast to uses of the term by Levi-Strauss (1966) (see Hammersley, 1999, p. 575), and subsequently in the specific field of RE research by Chater and Erricker (2013), Denzin and Lincoln apply the metaphor to describe incipient qualitative research paradigms (e.g. post-colonial, post-positivist, post-modernist and post-structuralist) that embrace ‘flexibility and plurality by amalgamating multiple disciplines (e.g. humanities, social sciences), multiple methodologies (e.g. ethnography, discourse analysis, deconstruction, Foucauldian genealogy), and varying theoretical perspectives (e.g. feminism, Marxism, and post-colonialism)’ to piece together emergent constructions ‘that mirror the eclectic work of a bricoleur’ (Rogers, 2012, p. 4). The end result is ‘a complex, dense, reflexive collage-like creation that represents the researcher’s images, understandings and interpretations of the world or phenomenon under analysis’ (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994, p. 3). It is a legitimate way of undertaking social research that respects ‘the complexity of meaning-making processes and the contradictions of the lived world’ (Rogers, 2012, p. 4), and ‘adds rigor, breadth, complexity, richness, and depth to any inquiry’ (Denzin and Lincoln, 1999, p. 6).

For Denzin and Lincoln (1999), there are five types of bricoleur as described below (see also Finlay, 2002, p. 532; Kincheloe, 2005, pp. 335-336; Rogers, 2012, pp. 6-7):

1. *Interpretive bricoleurs* recognise the influence of personal positioning upon research (e.g. life histories, personal and social characteristics, and (non-)religious worldviews), and reflexively-scrutinize how subjective responses and intersubjective dynamics affect the inquiry process.
2. *Methodological bricoleurs* combine multiple tools, methods and techniques of representation and interpretation to accomplish meaning-making tasks, allowing contextual dynamics and contingencies to dictate which to use.
3. *Theoretical bricoleurs* work within and between varied and sometimes conflicting theoretical frameworks to resolve problems that situate and determine the purposes, meanings, and uses of the research, thereby highlighting the plurality and complexity of the theoretical contexts in which objects of study can be interpreted.
4. *Political bricoleurs* promote a power literacy, raising awareness of the relationship between knowledge/power, and of the value-laden and normative nature of research, seeking often to develop counter-hegemonic forms of inquiry benefiting those who are disenfranchised.
5. *Narrative bricoleurs* recognise that researchers produce interpretations and representations of phenomena that reflect specific contextual perspectives (e.g. ideologies and discourses) and ‘narratological traditions’ (i.e. story types), and in response, seek to create more complex and sophisticated research by drawing upon multiple perspectives, voices and sources.

In terms of classroom pedagogy, rather than qualitative research, all of these types of bricoleur have the potential to be paradigmatic for pupils’ learning about curriculum content, and learning how to learn about curriculum content. They complement and draw together the dialogic and critical theories discussed above, and can provide a framework through which to learn about, implement and evaluate a plurality of pedagogical approaches and interpretative perspectives. Through a dialogic, critical and enquiry-based approach, curriculum subjects can balance consideration of (i) representations of the world and/or phenomena for analysis; (ii) interpretations, methodologies and methods; and (iii) personal reflection and reflexivity (Freathy *et al.*, 2015, p. 8). In such an approach, teachers and pupils respectively can be re-conceptualised as ‘pedagogical bricoleurs’ and ‘bricolage researchers’, negotiating a complex, dense, reflexive, collage-like curriculum that represents their own and other people’s images, understandings and interpretations of the subject matter.

In theory, the dialogic, critical and enquiry-based approach outlined above is ideally suited to the most contentious and politically charged areas of the curriculum, but how (if at all) can it be implemented in policy and practice? We answer this question below by presenting a set of innovative proposals for reconceptualising the aims, contents and methods of multi-faith Religious Education (RE) in English state-maintained schools without a religious affiliation.

PART TWO: RELIGIOUS EDUCATION – AN EXEMPLARY CASE

Academic and scholarly aims

Multi-faith RE in English state-maintained schools without a religious affiliation has faced a number of long-standing issues. Reflecting the breadth and depth of historical and contemporary controversies surrounding the subject, the main issue has been ‘uncertainty about the rationale for, and the aims and purposes of, RE’, as has been considered recurrently in the academic literature (see, for example, Everington, 2000 and Teece, 2011), and reported consistently by the UK’s Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (OFSTED, 2013, p. 14; 2010). For some commentators, this is due to the subject carrying ‘a significant explicit burden to address [a number of] social forces as part of its charge to shape young people’s spiritual, moral and social attitudes and behaviours’, thereby ensuring ‘its identity is not bounded by the study of religion simpliciter’ (Conroy, 2011, p. 3). This issue relates to a broader confusion between ‘the more general, whole-school promotion of spiritual, moral, social and cultural development’ to which all subjects should make a contribution, and the RE subject-specific ‘academic goal of extending and deepening pupils’ ability to make sense of religion and belief’ through in-depth and rigorous investigation and evaluation (OFSTED, 2013, pp. 14-15; see also Dinham and Shaw, 2015). Ultimately, according to OFSTED (2013, p. 14), the subject of RE ‘was increasingly losing touch with the idea that [it] should be primarily concerned with helping pupils to make sense of the world of religion and belief’.

We believe the past, present and probable future significance of religion(s) is sufficient justification for mandating the study of religion(s) in English state-maintained schools without a religious affiliation. This significance can be demonstrated personally, socially, culturally, politically, economically and morally, for example. It can also be seen locally, nationally, regionally and globally. Throughout their schooling, pupils should be expected to acquire knowledge and skills pertaining to the world’s most significant phenomena. RE provides the principal curriculum space through which to do so vis-à-vis this particular domain of interest. Developing knowledge and understanding of religion(s) is thus the foremost aim of RE, but it is not distinctive, because many subjects can contribute to its accomplishment, and it is not specific, because it can be achieved in multiple ways. More particular aims are therefore necessary to clarify this discrete subject’s distinctive and specific purpose.

To cohere with the long-standing, subject-based, intellectually-orientated and assessment/qualification-driven core curriculum of English state-maintained schools, we believe the aims of multi-faith RE in schools without a religious affiliation should be articulated first and foremost in academic and scholarly terms, and not, for example, primarily in relation to nurturing faith, developing the whole person (e.g. spiritually or morally), improving society, or transmitting cultural heritage (RE:ONLINE, 2017). As is the case with core curriculum subjects, the distinguishing aims, contents and methods of RE should be more explicitly aligned to, and defined by, pertinent disciplines in higher education, which determine and maintain standards of competence, subject to (peer-

reviewed) examination and qualification, pertaining to specialised, advanced and complex fields of knowledge and expertise (i.e. theology and religious studies) (see Baumfield, 2005). To this end, the approach we advocate is not neutral and value-free, but committed to providing pupils with the knowledge, skills, attributes and values associated with the communities of academic enquiry concerned especially for theology and religious studies. These communities may share characteristics with others, including certain academic attributes (such as open-mindedness, rigour, criticality and reflexivity) and scholarly values (such as integrity, honesty, fairness, respect and responsibility). Nevertheless, it is in recognition of their specific orientation towards the study of religion(s) (and/or cognate subject matter) that we prioritise these multi-disciplinary academic fields, acknowledging similarities and differences between them, as well as diversity within.

For this reason, applying our dialogic, critical and enquiry-based approach at an age appropriate conceptual level, RE should seek to (i) initiate pupils into some of the many hermeneutically- and methodologically-orientated dialogues occurring within the multi-disciplinary fields of theology and religious studies (not least ontological and epistemological conversations about the nature of religion(s) and how knowledge about religion(s) is created); (ii) offer pupils high-quality and first-hand experience of what it means to study religion(s); (iii) stimulate reflection on the pupils' own worldviews, and how these affect, and are affected by, their learning; and (iv) enable pupils independently to plan, manage and evaluate their own enquiries, drawing upon the skills and dispositions associated with scholars of religion(s) (Reader and Freathy, 2016). Furthermore, in the interests of transparency, we advocate teachers and pupils turning the spotlight of critical scrutiny upon the assumptions and principles underpinning their teaching and learning respectively.

We believe the ability of teachers to plan, teach and assess would be enhanced by couching the aims and purposes of RE predominantly in these terms, not least because it enables the subject's learning outcomes to be more narrowly defined in terms of knowledge and understanding of religion(s), interpretations, methodologies and methods, and subject-specific skills, attributes and values (Freathy *et al*, 2015, p. 8). The knowledge, skills, attributes and values accrued in RE could lead to other forms of development on the part of pupils (e.g. spiritual, moral, social and cultural) and could be applied to fulfil supplementary aims and purposes (e.g. the promotion of good citizenship and community cohesion). However, any singular conception of the good vis-à-vis religion(s) (e.g. of what is existentially or soteriologically valuable) and vis-à-vis RE as provided in English state-maintained schools without a religious affiliation (e.g. of what social, political, cultural and other extrinsic outcomes are desirable) is highly disputable and widely so. There are no incontrovertible criteria for pre-selecting possible applications of what is learned in RE, or pre-determining the influence it should have upon the non-academic development of pupils. It is impossible to prepare pupils for all conceivable uses of what they have learned, or to promote their personal development in every imaginable direction. We cannot, for example, provide comprehensive coverage of all relevant knowledge pertaining to each and every (non-)religious tradition, or support the development of all children so as to cohere faithfully with the full diversity of (non-

)religious worldviews present in our world. Instead, pragmatically and provisionally, we need to select knowledge, skills, attributes and values, that will best prepare pupils for what are, in absolute terms, unforeseeable (non-)religious encounters and trajectories in the future. We can endeavour to do so by providing them with intellectual and practical nous ('know-that' and 'know-how'), gained through participation in relevant culturally structured practices, and exposure to liminal but safe spaces of discovery pertaining to the world of (non-)religious beliefs, identities and practices (Baumfield, 2003, p. 175).

If RE is conceived more narrowly as taking pupils on a developmental journey from peripheral to more central participation in the communities of academic enquiry concerned with theology and religious studies, it creates empowering circumstances of possibility in terms of how pupils might subsequently apply what they have learned or respond to what they have encountered. This is not to argue for so-called 'intrinsic' aims over 'instrumental' ones, but rather (i) to uphold the quality, functionality and transferability of the knowledge, skills, attributes and values attained through dialogic, critical and enquiry-based study in RE, and (ii) to resist uncritical and uncontested fixations on overarching monological necessities to which such study is deemed subordinate. The academic and scholarly qualities we promote are imbued with a positive transformative potential that requires no formal extrinsic imperative in order to be present and then subsequently realised.

Complex and contested communities of enquiry

We are attracted to a participatory model of collaborative learning as a socio-cultural practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; see also Wenger, 1999) in which pupils attain competences associated with members of particular communities as part of transformative learning processes that shape and are shaped by their experiences (Wenger, 2000, p. 226). Through the mastery of knowledge and skills, they move from legitimate peripheral participation to full participation in communities of practitioners (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 29), thereby constantly attaining greater independence and self-direction. When pupils *engage* in classroom RE, we can *imagine* them, and they can *imagine* themselves, as members of wider communities of academic enquiry, and we can promote *alignment* between these local and external activities (Wenger, 2000, pp. 227-228). In this sense they can become nascent members of communities of enquiry bound by a willingness and ability to contribute to a joint *enterprise* (i.e. to learn about religion(s), and learn how to learn about religion(s)); by norms and relationships of *mutuality* as they interact (i.e. social capital within the scholarly community); and by 'a shared *repertoire* of communal resources – language, routines, sensibilities, artefacts, tools, stories, styles, etc.' of which they should be increasingly self-aware (i.e. theories, concepts, methodologies and methods) (Wenger, 2000, p. 229 [Our italics]). By offering opportunities 'to negotiate competence through an experience of direct participation', RE classrooms can be conceived as social units of learning in the context of a constellation of interrelated communities of academic enquiry concerned with theology and religious studies (Wenger, 2000, pp. 229-230).

In promoting pupil participation in these communities of enquiry, we are fully accepting that many will not extend their membership beyond that mandated by the statutory

provision of RE for all pupils in English state-maintained schools (except those withdrawn by their parents) (School Standards and Framework Act, 1998, Schedule 19) (see Stern 2010, p. 143). Nevertheless, they will have had an opportunity to develop competence and experience in the ways of knowing associated with these communities; to learn from their own interactions with the relevant practices, thereby opening up their identities to other ways of being; and to create bridges across communities and the boundaries between them, such that they might be better able to (re-)negotiate them in the future, and perhaps re-join the communities as and when desirable or necessary (Wenger, 2000, p. 239).

Even where there is an assumption that the rationale for, and nature and purpose of, RE should be defined primarily in terms of communities of enquiry engaged in the academic study of religion(s), the Religious Education Council's recent review pointed out that, 'both the meaning of the concept of "religion" and the most fruitful way of studying it are hotly contested' (REC, 2013, p. 53). We will address these two points in turn. First, huge complexity in terms of delineating RE's object(s) of study is masked by the apparently simple legal requirement for RE in schools without a religious affiliation 'to reflect that the religious traditions of Great Britain are in the main Christian whilst taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain' (Education Act 1996 c. 56, Part V, Chapter III, Agreed syllabuses, Section 375). Whilst we recognise the significance of this 'polyphonous' conceptual debate, and promote it as an area ripe for problematisation and exploration by researchers, teachers and pupils, our methodological and pedagogical arguments are not contingent upon any particular resolution, but are predicated upon its 'unfinalizability', in absolute terms, in the particular context of multi-faith RE in English state-maintained schools without a religious affiliation. For this reason, we use the term 'religion(s)' with circumspection, acknowledging its failure to uphold the legitimacy of learning about non-religious worldviews, and embracing the complications and contestations associated with the multiplicity of theories, definitions and dimensions of religion(s) posited within theology and religious studies (see, for example, Woodhead, 2011).

Second, theology and religious studies have become heterogeneous and multi-disciplinary academic fields of study, utilizing philosophical, historical, archaeological, linguistic, literary, psychological, sociological, cultural and anthropological perspectives, as well as the insights of innumerable philosophical and theoretical frameworks which cut across the disciplines, e.g. feminism, post-colonialism and post-structuralism (Freathy and Freathy, 2013a, p. 161). (For this reason, we use the phrase 'communities of academic enquiry' rather than the singular form.) The UK's higher education Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) (2014, p. 10) states that theology and religious studies 'may be characterised as a family of methods, subjects and fields of study, clustered around the investigation both of the phenomena of religions and belief systems in general, and of particular religious traditions, texts, practices, societies, art and archaeology' (QAA, 2014, p. 10). No less than thirty subjects are listed to which theology and religious studies relate and contribute, encompassing a diverse set of intellectual skills and competencies (QAA, 2014, pp. 11, 13-14). Seeing both as having the potential to be open to believers, non-believers or agnostics (QAA, 2014, pp. 6-7), it is accepted that there are a range of

motivations for engaging in theology and religious studies, and that the subject has the potential to be transformative at some level in a diversity of ways (QAA, 2014, p. 8).

We see no conflict between this broad description of theology and religious studies and our inclusive conceptualisation of RE. Theology, religious studies and RE (in English state-maintained schools without a religious affiliation) have been seen as distinct, but complementary, assuming theology is of a critical academic nature without the prerequisite of theistic commitment (Cush, 1999, p. 143). We advocate, however, a greater synergy and partnership (Cush and Robinson, 2014). In all three, there is little that is fixed and definitive; the disciplinary and subject boundaries (although porous) are expedient rather than essential. Along with Bird and Smith (2009), we suggest the resultant complexity and contestation is to be celebrated, not lamented.

Conceived as a bricolage, RE has the potential to incorporate a selection of the same extended family of methodologies, methods, theories, concepts, skills, competencies and subject matter as evident in theology and religious studies above. The criteria for selecting curricular content and pedagogical methods for school subjects are perhaps more limited by legal frameworks, policy documents, resourcing constraints and other such practical variables than they are for disciplines in higher education. Nevertheless, on liberal and democratic grounds, we argue that schools and teachers should have high levels of agency and freedom with regard to the determination of potentially-divisive and contentious subjects, such as RE, and that all such determinations should be regarded as conditional and open to critical scrutiny within public, political, professional, parental and pupil discourses. If teachers currently lack the credentials necessary to make such decisions, then they need to be appropriately professionalised.

Contributors to current debates about RE often attempt to provide definitive answers to fundamental questions about religion(s) and the study of religion(s), potentially leading to the establishment of universally-applicable criteria for selecting contents and methods. Such attempts fail to consider whether there can be anything other than provisional answers to these questions in the specific context of multi-faith RE in English state-maintained schools without a religious affiliation. Lewin (2017), for example, notes that the debates between Liam Gearon and Robert Jackson are enframed by a cognitivist and propositional view of religion that places competing truth claims in opposition. In response he argues that the presupposition and aim of RE should be a ‘transformed view of religion’ (p. 1), regarding religious statements as ‘performative’ and seeing texts, creeds, prayers and doctrines as spiritual exercises and practices rather than truth claims (p. 13). He does not question, as we do below, the legitimacy of adopting any single ‘monological’ framing of religion, and consequently of RE, in this particular educational setting.

Pedagogical pluralism

The multi-, inter- and supra-disciplinarity, and theoretical and conceptual complexity, noted above with regard to theology and religious studies in higher education is reflected within RE in schools, most notably, through the plethora of pedagogies propounded by educational theorists (see, for example, Grimmit, 2000). Each pedagogy reflects different

ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions relating to religion(s), and promotes principles and procedures which imply different answers to the overarching question concerning RE's aims and purposes (Gearon, 2014). As a consequence, it is clear that absolutely objective, neutral and value-free RE is unattainable (Freathy, 2015, p. 112).

There is no simple formula for determining the most appropriate pedagogy. There is no single approach which, if pursued to the exclusion of all others, would not leave out subject matter or theories, concepts and methods that some people would deem to be essential, or foreclose debates that should be opened up, so as to enable pupils to decide for themselves. Popular pedagogical taxonomies present ideal types representative of movements, discourses, models, paradigms, etc. The classroom reality may not be as clearly structured and delineated as these rhetorical pedagogies suggest. Teachers may deploy a repertoire of strategies and practices which constitute a vernacular pedagogy (McNamara, 1991). Even if accepting that different pedagogies are based on incommensurable and irreconcilable ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions teachers may decide to use them simultaneously or successively in a complementary fashion, applying whichever approach is most appropriate given the aims and content of particular lessons or units of work (see, for example, Blaylock (2012, pp. 4-5; Stern, 2006, pp. 74-79).

We maintain that eclecticism in this sphere is necessary and imposed by the circumstances of the case. To do justice to the complexity of research and teaching in theology and religious studies, and especially in multi-faith RE in English state-maintained schools without a religious affiliation, it is necessary to acknowledge and hold in tension a plurality of methodologies and pedagogies. This dialogism is not only practically beneficial, but also theoretically justifiable.

In this regard, the particularity of multi-faith RE in English state-maintained schools without a religious affiliation is important because its authority to adjudicate over the truth of publicly contested (non-)religious worldviews is circumscribed. Whilst some have recently argued that 'non-faith schools' should be 'clear and self-conscious about the sort of formation they offer (e.g. 'liberal humanist', 'secular egalitarian')' (Clarke and Woodhead, 2015, p. 34), RE in such schools has traditionally been described only in terms of what it is not (e.g. 'non-denominational' and/or 'non-confessional'). This reflects the legal stipulation that schools *without* a religious affiliation shall *not* provide for RE 'by means of any catechism or formulary which is distinctive of a particular religious denomination' (School Standards and Framework Act, 1998, Schedule 19 Paragraph 3). In the light of widely held standards of democratic citizenship and human rights, such as freedom of religion and belief, as well as the 'fundamental British values of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs' (Department for Education, 2014, p. 5), the underlying principle of this legal framework can be applied much more radically. First, it can be extended to any distinctively religious catechism or formulary, however liberally or inclusively defined. Second, it can be extended to any singular (religious or non-religious) worldview, philosophy or ideology, recognising that it is not only so-called

‘confessional’ forms of RE that endorse particular ontological and epistemological assumptions. Third, as will be explained below, it can be expanded to any singular conceptual, theoretical, interpretative or methodological framework.

Moulin (2009, p. 153) argues that ‘by favouring certain epistemological and methodological approaches, current pedagogies are at risk of infringing the liberal principle, and human right, of freedom of belief’. This is because a pedagogy for RE based upon one mode of interpretation precludes pupils from accessing knowledge of different points of view and may be incompatible with some pupils’ sincerely held and reasonable worldviews (Moulin, 2009, p. 154). In response, Moulin advocates a ‘liberal’ pedagogy in which liberalism is defined as a civil means of accommodating incompatible truth-claims and values rather than as an ideological end in itself (Moulin, 2009, p. 156, 163). This is underpinned by a social contract based on an overlapping public consensus on the conception of justice in the absence of agreement on the conception of the good (Rawls, 1971; 1993; 2001). In so doing, Moulin hopes to construct a fair pedagogy that does not rely on any singular religious or philosophical foundation (2009, p. 158) and which is ‘non-confessional and bias-free’ (Moulin, 2009, p. 164). The pedagogical principles he subsequently advocates include: (i) a ‘whole range of methods of enquiry into religion should be used’; (ii) where ‘a spectrum of opinions is available, students should be exposed to as many as possible whenever possible’; and (iii) where ‘there are opposing views, differing opinions are to be represented by their most cogent arguments’ (Moulin, 2009, p. 160). The result would be an opportunity for hermeneutical dialogue ‘taking the form of a Rortian conversation united “by civility rather than by a common goal, much less by a common ground” [Rorty, 1998, p. 318]’ (Watson, 2006, p. 121) (see also Freathy and Freathy, 2013a, pp. 160-161).

Following the arguments above, dialogic, critical and enquiry-based multi-faith RE in English state-maintained schools without a religious affiliation should: (i) adopt a procedural rather than ideological agnosticism regarding ontological claims, which can be characterised as non-religious, not anti-religious; secular, not secularist; (ii) be characterised by epistemological and methodological heterogeneity and multi-disciplinarity (including the usage of multiple conceptual, theoretical and interpretative frameworks); and (iii) seek to ensure its unavoidable normative intentions are deliberate, legitimate and explicit, as well as being the object of critical analysis and evaluation on the part of all stakeholders including pupils (see, for example, Alberts, 2007). In this context, the indeterminacy and irresolvability of fundamental ontological, epistemological and methodological issues has to be a starting point for more pragmatic discussions about the subject’s aims, methods and content. For these reasons, the search for a single ‘ground’ needs to be replaced by a new metaphor that recognises dynamism, diversity, complexity, contestation, provisionality, flux, fluidity and uncertainty (Freathy, 2015).

Next we turn to the question of how the curricular and pedagogical principles articulated above can be translated into operable and effective practices.

PART THREE: PRACTISING THEORY AND THEORISING PRACTICE

Many high-profile contributions to the field of RE research have failed to bridge successfully the theory-practice divide (Blaylock, 2004). The project of which this article is an outcome did not seek to translate theory into practice, but rather to develop both together in a reciprocal relationship conferring mutual benefits (Oancea and Furlong, 2007). We believe ‘close-to-practice’ theorisation, and ‘close-to-theory’ practice, heightens the potential for knowledge transfer and research impact in the field of educational research, particularly when it concerns context-dependent and jurisdiction-bounded educational policies, practices and settings. In our project, experimental classroom practices were developed by a Specialist Leader in Education in a primary school (5-11 year olds) in South West England in collaboration with researchers at the University of Exeter. The versatility of the resultant practices have led to them being applied successfully in the context of mono- and multi-faith RE (including that which addresses non-religious worldviews), and in primary and secondary schools with or without a religious affiliation. (In some schools they have been applied to other curriculum subjects, particularly across the humanities.) This diversity of application has occurred despite the fact that the underlying curricular and pedagogical principles – as articulated above – were developed specifically with regard to the policy and legal frameworks defining RE in English state-maintained schools without a religious affiliation. As we have shown, the particular characteristics of this context – often ignored by RE theorists and practitioners – have the potential to differentiate radically the nature and purpose of RE occurring within it from that occurring in other settings.

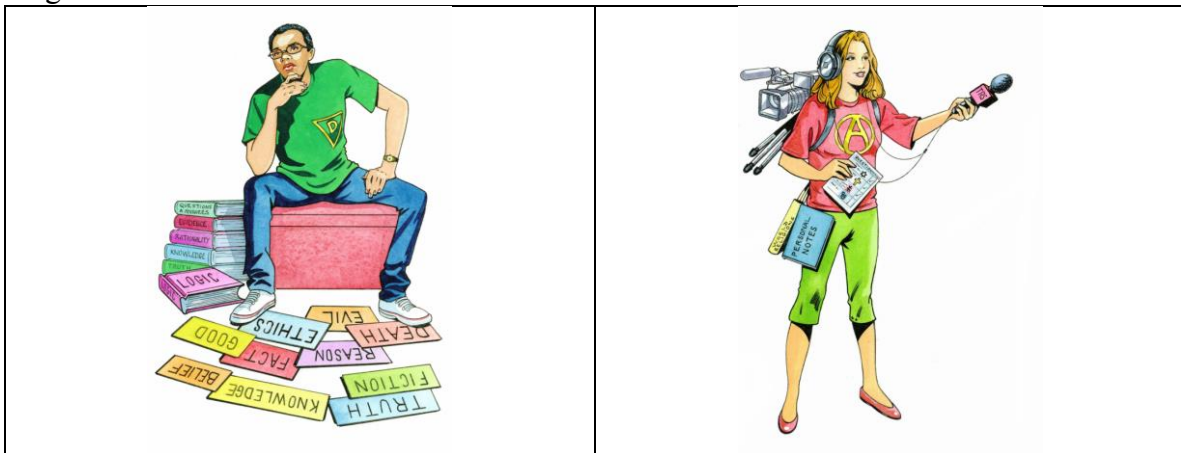
The practical approach to RE in primary schools that we developed was called the ‘RE-searchers approach’. It has been disseminated to teachers of RE through professional journals (Freathy and Freathy, 2013b; 2014) and more recently via a dedicated online space (Freathy and Freathy, 2016). In accordance with the notion of a dialogic, critical and enquiry-based bricolage, and our proposed aims, methods and contents for RE, the underlying assumptions were briefly summarised for teachers as follows:

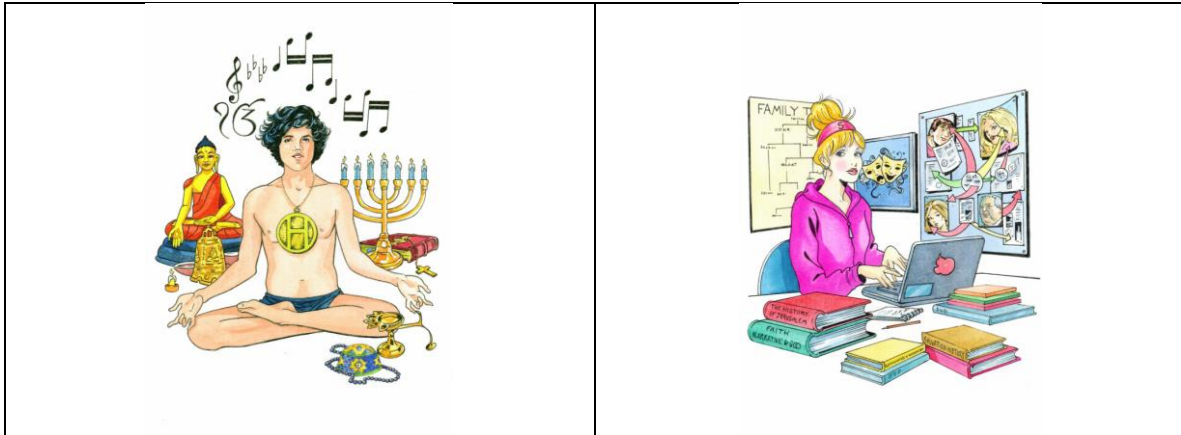
- (i) religions are contested, complex, diverse, multi-faceted, evolving and multi-dimensional phenomena (including, for example, doctrines, laws, literature, languages, narratives, traditions, histories, institutions, communities, people, places, practices and materialities);
- (ii) multiple methodologies, methods, theories and concepts can be used to generate knowledge about religion(s), drawn from multiple disciplinary perspectives (e.g. theological, philosophical, historical, archaeological, linguistic, literary, psychological, sociological, cultural and anthropological); and
- (iii) a plurality of pedagogical approaches and interpretative frameworks can be deployed legitimately in RE in recognition of (i) and (ii) above.

On the basis of these assumptions innovative pedagogical procedures were devised and exemplified in corresponding curriculum resources (Freathy, 2016; Freathy *et al.*, 2015). In practice, pupils are presented with a series of cartoon characters, each personifying a

research methodology and associated methods. Individually the characters are called Debate-it-all Derek, Ask-it-all Ava, Have-a-go Hugo and See-the-story Suzie, but collectively they are known as the ‘RE-searchers’ (see Figure 1). Each character holds different assumptions about the nature of religion(s); has a preferred way of approaching the study of religion(s); and employs particular methods of enquiry. Once familiar with the hermeneutical and methodological particularity of each character, pupils can undertake learning processes associated with each of them in pursuit of different understandings of religion(s). They can then discuss the religious phenomenon under study, the RE-searcher character through whose eyes it has been viewed, and their own skills, dispositions and worldviews as researchers (Freathy and Freathy, 2013a, p. 163). Thereby, pupils learn about and implement multiple methodologies and methods, evaluating their significance, appropriateness and effectiveness, as they co-construct knowledge in collaboration with the teacher and their peers. In this regard, the approach coheres with a number of recent reports from the national inspectorate of schools which found that ‘in the most effective RE teaching, enquiry is placed at the heart of learning’ (OFSTED, 2013, p. 23), ‘a range of enquiry skills’ are used (OFSTED, 2010, pp. 6, 45), and enquiries are selected and sequenced to ensure breadth, balance, relevance and progression (OFSTED, 2013, p. 27). The RE-searcher characters developed so far are indicative personifications of the wide range of interpretations, methodologies and methods deployed in theology and religious studies. We would welcome the creation of many more characters, particularly if they cohere with the knowledge, skills and experiences of teachers and pupils.

Figure 1: The RE-searchers





Conclusion

Dialogic, critical and enquiry-based learning can explicitly promote criticality and reflexivity, expose ontological and epistemological assumptions for scrutiny, and initiate pupils into hermeneutically- and methodologically-orientated dialogues. In such an approach, teachers and pupils respectively can be reconceptualised as ‘pedagogical bricoleurs’ and ‘bricolage researchers’. When applied to the context of multi-faith RE in English state-maintained schools without a religious affiliation, pupils can be provided with: knowledge and skills associated with the communities of academic enquiry concerned with theology and religious studies; experience of what it means to study religion(s), reflecting upon their own positionality; and the opportunity to plan, manage and evaluate their own enquiries. The RE-searchers approach can be upheld as a highly-innovative means of converting these curricular and pedagogical principles into practical procedures suitable for pupils across the age and ability range within primary schools. Thereby a small number of cartoon characters can be used by teachers and pupils to examine ontological, epistemological and methodological issues associated with research and teaching in theology, religious studies and RE. Although the notion of a dialogic, critical and enquiry-based bricolage probably reflects some existing best practice (especially in phases of education prior to public examination preparation), it offers theoretical legitimacy and coherence to such examples by re-conceptualising the transformative and normative potential, and the ontological, epistemological and methodological framing, of this highly contested and politicised curriculum subject.

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