

‘Ah, now I see!’ Why the metaphors we use for ‘understanding’ in RE matter

*In this article **Karen Walshe** shares with us the fruits of her recent research into the use of metaphors when people talk of understanding. This has significant importance for RE as much of the subject’s literature has understanding down as a major aim of RE but seldom explains what it might actually mean to understand.*

Introduction

For some time now I have been particularly interested in how people talk about ‘understanding’ and what that tells us about the different ways that ‘understanding’ is understood. My work in this area to date has taught me that while understanding is clearly central to most, if not all educational endeavours, what is meant by ‘understanding’ is not clear and is highly contested (Walshe and Teece 2013).

In an attempt to pin down exactly what might be meant by ‘understanding’, educators, researchers and philosophers have explored questions such as:

- Is there one such thing named ‘understanding’, or several types of understanding?
- What is the relationship between understanding and truth?
- What is the relationship between understanding and knowledge?
- What is the relationship between understanding and belief?
- What are the necessary and sufficient conditions for understanding?
- What capacities are indicative of understanding?

Yet despite these efforts, there is still no clear consensus about what might be meant by ‘understanding’. Given that understanding appears at the centre of the educational stage, it seems remarkable that we don’t know, or rather don’t agree, what it is. After all, if we don’t know what counts as understanding, how can we teach *for* understanding (Walshe 2020); and how can we know when a student has achieved it (Walshe and Teece 2013)?

What is meant by ‘understanding’?

When we think about how the term is used in general everyday discourse, we find that ‘understanding’ is used to:

- refer to the ability to comprehend, grasp or perceive an item of knowledge
- denote agreement or an arrangement or contract
- confirm awareness of something
- allude to a person’s sympathetic and considerate nature
- express empathy and compassion
- infer belief

Part of the problem in defining it then is that the same term is used in relation to different things in different contexts. It can be used as a verb (e.g. ‘He understood why she said that’), or a noun (e.g.

‘They came to an understanding’) or an adjective (e.g. ‘She was very understanding’). To complicate matters further, even when *understanding* is used in the same context (e.g. as an educational goal), it is not clear whether the reference is to (a) objectual understanding (*understanding of* the subject matter), (b) propositional understanding (*understanding that* something is the case), (c) explanatory understanding (*understanding why* something is the case) or (d) performative understanding (the *ability to act* as a consequence of understanding) (Grimm et al. 2017). Thus, the multiplicity of ways in which this term is employed and interpreted makes it very difficult to arrive at definitive conclusions concerning what exactly is meant by ‘understanding’ (Walshe 2020).

What is meant by ‘understanding’ in RE?

If we look to RE curriculum guidance documentation, we find that the majority of references are to objectual understanding (understanding of) and simply denote the object of study; that is, they identify that which students are expected to develop an understanding of. For example:

- the nature of religion (DCFS 2010, p. 61)
- religions and worldviews (QCA 2004, p. 7)
- cultures and beliefs (DCFS 2010, p. 8)
- similarities and differences (DCFS 2010, p. 22)
- concepts (DCFS 2010, p. 23)
- ultimate questions and ethical issues (QCA 2004, p. 11)
- the significance of religions and beliefs in the world today (QCA 2004, p. 8; DCFS 2010, p. 7)
- what it might mean to belong to a religion or worldview (DCFS 2010, p. 23)
- students’ own beliefs and values (DCFS 2010, p. 41)

A similar picture emerges if we look to key reports in RE published in the last decade. Here ‘understanding’:

- is included alongside knowledge and skills as an intended outcome in RE (e.g. REC 2013, p. 6)
- denotes the object of study, such as: religion and belief (REC 2013, p. 12; Dinham and Shaw, 2015, p. 4; Clarke and Woodhead 2015, p. 23), religions and worldviews (REC and NATRE 2017, p. 9), ‘religion’ as a category (REC 2018, p. 36), the human quest for meaning (REC 2018, p. 73), the world (REC and NATRE 2017, p. 4) and students’ own lives (Dinham and Shaw 2015, p. 3) and worldviews (REC 2018, p. 5)
- is classified into categories; e.g. practical (Dinham and Shaw 2015, p. 23), conceptual (REC 2018, p. 6), academic (REC 2018, p. 20) and religious (Clarke and Woodhead 2015, p. 34; REC and NATRE 2017, p. 50)
- is described in terms of its character, such as: genuine (Clarke and Woodhead 2015, p. 8), secure (REC 2018, p. 44), critical (REC 2018, p. 13), refined (REC 2018, p. 5) and nuanced (REC 2018, p. 27).

What is not clear, however, is what it might mean for students to develop an ‘informed’, ‘systematic’, ‘coherent’, ‘genuine’, ‘critical’, ‘refined’, ‘insightful’ and ‘nuanced’ understanding of, for instance, religions and worldviews.

Why does this matter?

Research shows that the way in which ‘understanding’ is presented in curriculum documentation is first filtered through a teacher’s own understanding of ‘understanding’ before it reaches the student (Entwistle and Smith 2002). Consequently, students are often expected to reach an understanding equivalent to that held by the teacher. Newton and Newton (1999) refer to this phenomenon as

‘enculturation’ and argue that from an early age, students pick up clues from a teacher’s discourse, the questions asked and the answers accepted about what kind of understanding is expected in particular subjects and by individual teachers. Ambiguity in curricular documentation is therefore problematic as it leads to teacher uncertainty, which in turn impacts on student attainment (Walshe 2020).

Given this relationship between a teacher’s understanding of what might constitute understanding in their subject and his/her students’ own personal understanding, it is worth asking ‘What conception of understanding underwrites what happens in the classroom?’ (Perkins 1998, p. 39).

How do (trainee) teachers conceive of ‘understanding’ in RE?

As a teacher educator, I am privileged to work with some amazing trainee teachers as they embark on the first stage of their entrance into the RE profession. My role as an RE teacher educator gave me an ideal opportunity to undertake some research (generously funded by the Farmington Institute) into how trainee teachers conceptualise ‘understanding’ in RE. What follows is a summary of how 31 trainee teachers (completing Secondary PGCE RE courses at the universities of Exeter and Birmingham) talked about their understanding of ‘understanding’ in RE in a series of semi-structured focus group interviews.

Much of what these trainee teachers talked about related to key skills that they felt, at least to some extent, would count as evidence that students had understood the subject matter being explored in RE; skills such as analysis, application, synthesis, evaluation, empathy and reflexivity. They also talked more broadly about the nature of understanding, exploring issues such as whether different academic subjects have different forms/types of understanding, and whether it is ever really possible for an outsider to understand an insider’s perspective. But when I went back and listened to the recorded interviews again, I noticed that many of them were using figurative language and metaphors when talking about ‘understanding’ in RE.

Much has been written about the power of metaphor (see, for example, Lakoff and Johnson 1980 and Geary 2011). Part of that power lies in a metaphor’s ability to express ideas about a complex concept (such as time) using a more familiar concept (such as money). To talk about time as money (which it clearly is not) is to say that we value time as a resource that we do not want to waste. By paying close attention to the metaphors used by these trainee teachers, I was able to gain valuable insights into the various ways they conceptualised ‘understanding’.

The three most popular metaphors used by these trainee teachers were (a) understanding is seeing, (b) understanding is constructing and (c) understanding is grasping. This is perhaps not surprising given that these are among the most popular metaphors used for ‘understanding’ in general. What I found particularly interesting, however, is that the metaphors they used (‘seeing’, ‘constructing’ and ‘grasping’) were verbs and focused primarily on the processes involved in the act of understanding rather than on the outcomes.

Understanding is seeing

The most frequently used metaphor by these trainee teachers was ‘understanding is seeing’. They used this metaphor to express the idea that understanding ‘is when you see something for the first time’. For them, understanding constitutes a change in one’s awareness; a fresh perspective; a new insight. As with our general capacity to see, understanding can be blinkered, impaired and

compromised; partial and one-sided; but it can also be clear, sharp and lucid, and result in 'a myriad of perspectives'.

For some of these trainee teachers, however, the metaphor of 'seeing' was not quite sufficient: one must not only see, one must 'look beyond'. This act of looking beyond refers to a deliberate turning of one's eyes. To equate 'understanding' with 'looking', therefore, for these trainee teachers, is to emphasise the intentionality and dynamic nature of the hermeneutic process.

Understanding is constructing

The second more popular conceptual metaphor employed by these trainee teachers, 'understanding is constructing', revealed that for them the process of understanding entails seeing connections between and fitting together discrete pieces of knowledge to form a 'whole big picture'. To conceive of understanding in terms of 'constructing' is to focus on the whole and its constituent elements and the means by which they are brought together. It reflects a constructivist or social constructivist view of understanding that holds that learning is a dynamic process in which the learner (individually or with others) actively constructs their own understanding(s).

Understanding is grasping

The third most popular conceptual metaphor employed by these trainee teachers, 'understanding is grasping', draws on another popular metaphor for understanding: 'understanding is comprehending' (to mentally grasp), suggesting that understanding is a conscious mental activity requiring the grasping of explanatory and other coherence-making relationships (Bourget 2015).

As with all metaphors, the notion of understanding as grasping is grounded in our everyday experience of the world and how we function in it (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). To talk about understanding in terms of 'grasping' expresses something of the frustration experienced when understanding seems to evade us and slip through our fingers. The view of understanding revealed in this metaphor is that understanding is intellectually demanding; a conscious and deliberate endeavour that goes beyond knowing (Strevens 2017) and involves making connections and constructing relationships.

Why do these metaphors matter?

As noted by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), how we think metaphorically matters. For these trainee teachers, understanding in RE is primarily construed as a hermeneutic exercise, an intellectually demanding endeavour of meaning-making. The metaphors they used (seeing, constructing and grasping) focus on the dynamic and developmental nature of the processes involved in understanding rather than on the outcomes. This is particularly interesting when we consider that the language of educational outcomes dominates much curricular documentation and educational discourse (Walshe 2020).

How we think metaphorically also matters because metaphors provide us with a means of acting towards a particular concept. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 5), 'we act according to the way we conceive of things'. The metaphors employed by these trainee teachers (seeing, constructing, and grasping) each suggest their own way(s) of acting towards understanding. For

instance, if these trainee teachers were to focus on how students 'construct' understanding(s) of religious beliefs and ideas, they might design their lessons to explicitly focus on enabling students to build complex conceptual maps of religions and worldviews.

Finally, how we think metaphorically matters in that while metaphors can uncover deeply held beliefs that teachers have about their profession and practice (Cushing 2019; Fábíán 2013), they may also limit, constrain and confuse us (Rodgers 2016) as metaphors keep us within the confines of our former experiences (Guilherme and Souza de Freitas 2018). In this way, metaphors can hide as much as they reveal. The metaphors of seeing, constructing and grasping may give us some insights into how these trainee teachers conceptualised 'understanding', but that can't be all there is to say about understanding in RE (Grimm 2011).

Understanding as a metaphor

Perhaps there is room in this article to say one more thing about 'understanding' in RE. On closer examination we see that the term 'understanding' is itself a metaphor, albeit for some a 'dead' (Jäkel 1995), 'frozen' or 'historical' metaphor (Nordquist 2018). If we look at the way the term has been used over time, we find that the Old English word 'understandan' (composed of *under* + *standan*) was used to signify 'to stand under', 'to stand before', 'to stand in the midst of', 'to support', 'to be in the presence of', 'to be close to', 'to keep apart' and 'to separate' (Newman 2001, p. 188).

'Understanding' then has a strong metaphorical foundation, even if it has since become conventionalised (Cameron 2010) and so much a part of our language that it has lost its force and imaginative effectiveness (Nordquist 2018). Perhaps rather than being dead, 'understanding' may be best described as a 'dormant' metaphor; its 'figurative nature slumbering unseen, just below the surface' (Geary 2011, 25). What is noticeable about the way the Old English word was used is that it had something to do with how one positioned oneself (under/before/in the midst of, etc.) in relation to the object of study. If we were to awaken the metaphorical nature of 'understanding' in RE, we might find ourselves less preoccupied with the extent to which a student has accrued factual knowledge and more concerned with how a student positions himself or herself in relation to that which is being understood. What exactly this might look would be a useful question to explore in a subsequent publication.

If you would like to read more about the study referred to in this article, please see Walshe (2020).

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