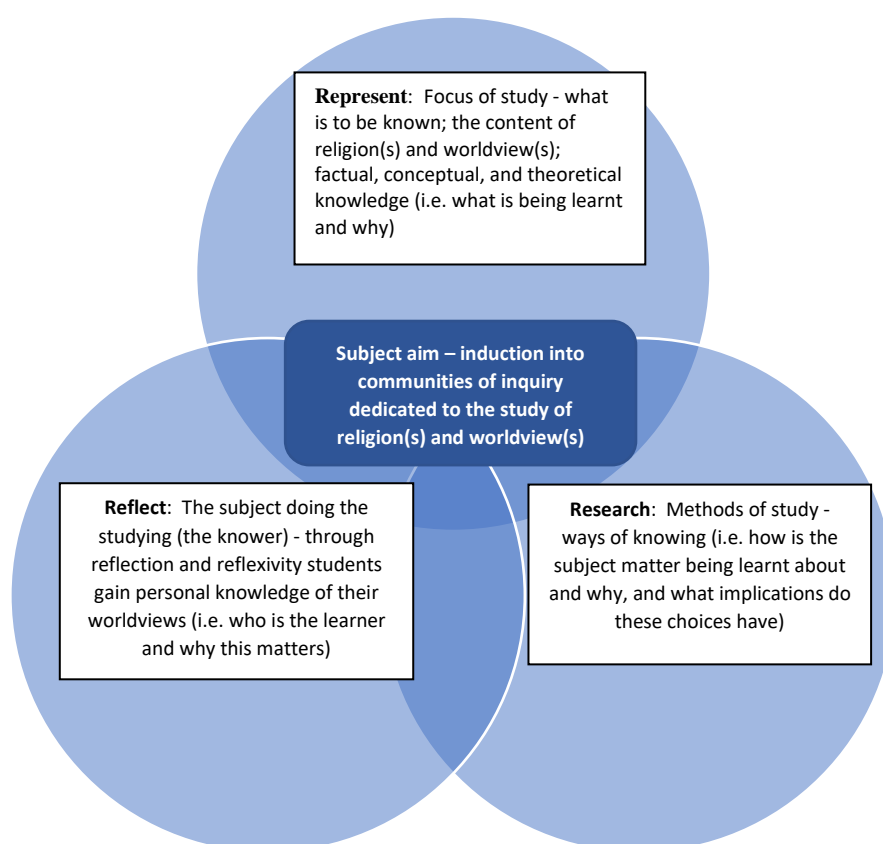


## Translating the RE-searchers Approach

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Over the last decade, at the University of Exeter, we have sought to develop a range of pedagogical approaches to promote critical engagement by learners with questions of *representation*, *reflection* and *research* in the study of religion(s) and worldview(s) (Freathy and John, 2019). By equipping learners with substantive, disciplinary and personal knowledge, as well as relevant scholarly skills and tools, we have sought to induct them into the academic communities of inquiry dedicated to the study of religion(s) and worldview(s). The diagram below summarises our curriculum framework:



In terms of the *research* dimension, we believe that multiple disciplines, interpretations, methodologies and methods can be used to generate knowledge about religion(s) and worldview(s), and that different approaches contribute significantly to the results and conclusions of such studies. The 'RE-searchers Approach' (Freathy et al., 2015) intended for primary schools (5-11 year olds) was created to encourage learners to consider the importance and effectiveness of various interpretations, methodologies and methods of inquiry in Religious Education (RE). Pupils encounter a range of RE-searcher cartoon characters, each signifying a different methodological approach: Ask it-all Ava (the interviewer/empathiser); Have-a-go Hugo (the experienter/participant); Debate-it-all Derek (the philosopher/critic); and See-the-story Suzie (the narrator/interpreter). Through inquiry-based approaches, and perhaps by taking on different persona, learners are encouraged and enabled to implement and evaluate a range of interpretative lenses and methodological tools;

answer real world questions; make sense of, and meaning from, their findings; and to identify further issues to be explored. For secondary schools, we developed a similar approach, culminating in the publication of the open-access textbook, *Who is Jesus?* (2019), which examined the figure of Jesus through a variety of different cultural, religious and disciplinary lenses (e.g. artistic, visually-impaired, Muslim, feminist and cross-cultural). We are absolutely delighted to learn about the translation of the RE-searchers materials into Norwegian, and hope that as a consequence more researchers and teachers in Norway will become interested in evaluating and developing the approach with us.

The RE-searchers Approach was first developed in 2013 at Sir Robert Geffrey's School, Cornwall, England, and this led to the award of the 2014 *TES* [Times Educational Supplement] Humanities Award, with judges noting that "engagement was increased, children were more understanding of other viewpoints and most importantly they became more adept at analyzing information from multiple stances". Some primary and secondary schools in England have implemented the RE-searchers Approach in full, but many more have either adopted selected aspects of the pedagogy or otherwise been influenced by its underlying assumptions and intentions. Alongside 'Understanding Christianity' (Christian Education Movement) and 'Primary 1000' (National Association of Teachers of Religious Education [NATRE]), the RE-searchers Approach has been named as one of three "individual projects", that is "making a considerable impact at school level" in England (Whitworth, 2020). By way of illustration, the *Challenging Knowledge in RE* series of twelve textbooks, produced by REToday Services, for distribution to over 3,000 NATRE members across primary and secondary schools, adopts a teaching and learning approach strongly influenced by our work, following the three-stranded model articulated above, and in particular being more deliberate and explicit about identifying and applying different methods of study. Similarly, the RE Council of England and Wales (REC) funded Commission on RE argued that pupils should be taught "the different ways in which religion and worldviews can be understood, interpreted and studied, including through a wide range of academic disciplines", and described the RE-searchers project as "a successful and influential example of school-university collaboration exploring the use of different disciplines and methodologies in RE" (2017, p. 88). Likewise, in a recent THEOS report, Trevor Cooling (the former Chair of the REC) identified four examples of cutting-edge practice in RE of which three were drawn from projects led by the University of Exeter. The RE-searchers Approach, he said, "has pioneered resources ... that enable pupils to experience some of the different disciplinary approaches that can be used in studying worldviews" (Cooling, 2020).

The influence of the RE-searchers Approach has not been limited to the United Kingdom. In Norway, for example, we have collaborated with colleagues at NTNU: the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim (and through them, expert practitioners at Charlotten Lund Lower Secondary School), and Oslo Metropolitan University, where the RE-searchers model is used to "help student teachers to understand the multifaceted nature of the phenomenon of religion by suggesting ways of exploring both religion as a phenomenon and specific religions in a very intuitive, practice-orientated manner". The University of Helsinki, Finland, has also adopted the approach and adapted it for use within an online course which, from Autumn 2020, became mandatory for all 177 students undertaking the Theology and Religious Studies degree. With a view to teaching undergraduates about how knowledge is acquired within Theology and Religious Studies, the RE-searchers Approach helps students think about different research methods in the study of religion(s) and gives them the

opportunity – via the RE-searcher characters – to view religious content through different disciplinary lenses.

In terms of further development and future work, we are very keen to collaborate with others to refine the theories and/or practices associated with the pedagogical approach, and even perhaps develop a wider range of RE-searcher characters. We are also fascinated by how the approach relates to, and differs from, the long-standing interest in English RE in the personal knowledge and worldviews of learners, especially how our approach might promote a more academic and scholarly orientation towards reflexivity, reflectivity and positionality (Larkin et al, 2019).

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