

# **Discourse**

**Learning and Teaching in  
Philosophical and  
Religious Studies**



**The Higher Education Academy**

# **Discourse:**

## **Learning and Teaching in Philosophical and Religious Studies**

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# **Discourse:**

Volume 8, Number 1, Autumn 2008

The journal of the *Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies of the Higher Education Academy*

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## Progression and Independent Learning

This issue of *Discourse* is largely devoted to papers from 'Spoon-Feeding or Critical Thinking? A Level / Higher to First Year Progression in Religious Studies and Theology', a conference held at St Anne's College, Oxford on 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> July 2008. The conference addressed a range of themes around progression, both conceptually and practically. Moving students beyond the expectations of 'spoon-feeding' and helping them develop their independent learning skills was seen as both a challenge and achievable by the conference presenters—schoolteachers and academics alike. The papers provide positive solutions to issues faced by lecturers today. Further information about the conference itself can be found on our website: <http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/view.html/prsevents/313>

Many of these papers arose from projects funded or supported by the Subject Centre and demonstrate the diversity of pedagogical development taking place in our disciplines. It is a testament to the deep expertise and insights that

higher education educators in our discursive disciplines bring to reflection on issues around progression for a diverse and changing student body, that we are able to publish such a good selection of papers here.

Progression is a theme for our work in philosophy this year too, and next summer a conference will address philosophy specific issues. Confirmed speakers include Anthony Seldon, Master of Wellington College and John Lippit from Hertfordshire University. Initial information and a call for papers is available:  
<http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/view.html/prsevents/420>

The news and information section of this edition also contains details of forthcoming events, including a conference on Teaching Black Theology, a workshop on using Creativity in TRS teaching in conjunction with the C4C CETL, and a colloquium on academic practice in our disciplines in collaboration with the Centre for Excellence in Academic Practice CETL.

Since the last issue we have been putting together the outcomes of a major international conference on e-learning held in the summer of 2008, along with other resources and outcomes of our e-learning project, and we shall be publishing a special e-journal edition of *Discourse* in the New Year.

Many thanks to those of you who returned the postcard included with the last edition. As you may know, the journal is now available as a searchable resource online, and we are committed to reducing the number of printed copies we send out, so please let us know if you would like to be removed from the hard copy mailing list, and/or added to an email list to receive a bulletin when a new e-version becomes available.

As always, feedback and comments are welcome:  
**david@prs.heacademy.ac.uk**

All good wishes for the Christmas break.

David

## **News and Information**

## The Higher Education Academy

**T**he Higher Education Academy's mission is to help institutions, discipline groups and all staff to provide the best possible learning experience for their students.

Its aims and objectives are:

1. To be an authoritative and independent voice on policies that influence student learning experiences;
2. To support institutions in their strategies for improving the student learning experience;
3. To lead, support and inform the professional development and recognition of staff in higher education;
4. To promote good practice in all aspects of support for the student learning experience;
5. To lead the development of research and evaluation to improve the quality of the student learning experience;
6. To be a responsive, efficient and accountable organisation.

**<http://www.heacademy.ac.uk>**

## The Subject Network

The Subject Network is a network of 24 subject centres based in higher education institutions throughout the UK. It is funded by the four HE funding bodies in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. It aims to promote high quality learning and teaching through development and transfer of successful practice in all subject disciplines.

# **The Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies**

The Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies is based at the University of Leeds and at a partner site at the University of Wales, Lampeter and covers the disciplines of Philosophy, Philosophy of Science, History of Science (including the History of Medicine and Technology), Theology, and Religious Studies.

## **Mission statement**

To support and promote Philosophical, Theological and Religious Studies higher education in the UK, and to build on its culture of dialogue and reflection.

## **Strategic Aims**

- To work in collaboration with PRS colleagues and students in order to be effective advocates for our disciplines in the development of national and regional policies.
- To fund and take part in projects and events that support the development and recognition of good teaching practice in PRS.
- To participate in relevant research developments.
- To provide a repository of relevant knowledge and expertise within our subject communities.
- To maintain a well managed, flexible and properly structured subject centre staffed by appropriately qualified people with academic and creative strengths.

Visit our website at <http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk>  
or contact us directly:

## **Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies**

Department of Theology and Religious Studies

University of Leeds

Leeds LS2 9JT

Tel: 0113 343 4184 Email: [enquiries@prs.heacademy.ac.uk](mailto:enquiries@prs.heacademy.ac.uk)

# Departmental Visits and Workshops

## Departmental visits and requests

We have visited almost all of the departments in our subject communities—however, we are always happy to come and see you to gather information about existing effective practice and to discover the most pressing issues for your department and for individual lecturers and tutors. Regular contact with the academic communities we serve is a vital part of our mission, as it enables us to ensure that we meet your needs in the best ways possible. If you would like a subject expert in your discipline to come to your department, then please get in touch, or feel free to contact us at any time to discuss matters to do with learning and teaching.

## Departmental workshops

With learning and teaching issues of central importance to the future of higher education in university strategies and government policies, it is essential for individual departments and academics to be able to articulate the values that underpin their teaching methods, and to show how these are developed reflectively. Students are taking an ever growing interest in the ways they are taught and the benefits they gain from education at university. Furthermore, the scholarship of teaching attracts more research funding than ever before into departments.

The Subject Centre for PRS runs workshops to facilitate reflection on these issues. These are offered free of charge, and can be tailored to the specific needs of your department.

The Subject Centre has recently published a booklet detailing the workshops we have developed and successfully run for philosophers, called *Thinking About Teaching Philosophy*. If you would like a copy of this, or have any other ideas of work we could do with your department, please get in touch. The list of workshops is also available online at:  
**<http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/events/workshops.html>**

We are in the process of developing a similar booklet for theology and religious studies and related disciplines, and if you have any ideas for TRS workshops that would be useful to you then please contact us.

# Teaching Black Theology

**Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre, Birmingham  
January 9<sup>th</sup> 2009**

## Keynote Speaker: Dr Anthony Reddie

Research Fellow and Consultant in Black Theological Studies for the Methodist Church and the Queen's Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education and editor of Black Theology: An International Journal.

### **Other confirmed speakers include:**

- Dr Mukti Barton
- Dr Robert Beckford
- Bishop Delroy Hall
- Revd Dr Michael Jagessar

Black theology is an area of increasing importance for UK higher education. The Subject Centre for PRS is organising a conference to bring together educators, pastors and other members of religious or community organisations involved in higher education in the UK to consider issues around the teaching of Black and Womanist theology. The conference aims to highlight recent developments in the teaching of Black and Womanist theology, to share good practice, and to provide a forum for discussion of the key issues involved. We expect the discussions to be informative, lively, and interactive where possible, inspiring future work in this area of growing interest.

### **Topics to be discussed include:**

- Black theology as it gives rise to an experiential, transformative pedagogy in the British context.
- The critical reading of Scripture through the lens of Black British experience.
- The influence of Black theological discourse and Caribbean theology on the teaching of ecumenical theology and interfaith studies.
- Teaching the Bible from a Black theological perspective; examining how issues of colour, ethnicity, gender and class affect interpretations of the Bible.
- Teaching Black Theology through visual culture.

The event is provided at no charge to those involved in the teaching of Black theology.

**Deadline for registration: November 25<sup>th</sup> 2008.**

For more details, or to register, visit:

**<http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/view.html/prsevents/418>**

# Beyond the Ordinary:

## Creative Approaches to Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religious Studies

### C4C Centre, York St John University

#### June 24<sup>th</sup> 2009

The Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies and C4C CETL are organising a one-day workshop to bring together academics, students and other interested parties to discuss creative approaches to learning and teaching in Theology and Religious Studies at under- and postgraduate levels in the UK. The workshop aims to highlight recent developments in the use of creativity in teaching Theology and Religious Studies, to showcase and share examples work in this area in higher education institutions in the UK, and to provide a space for practitioners to network and discuss relevant issues.

#### **Call for proposals**

Proposals are invited for papers / workshops / presentations / discussion groups / posters related to one or more of the following themes within Theology and Religious Studies teaching, or to other relevant topics in TRS:

- Creative approaches to teaching and learning: what works and what doesn't?
- Creative assessment
- Special disciplinary problems/issues related to creative approaches in teaching and learning
- Managing creativity in the classroom
- Student experiences of creative approaches to teaching and learning; how do students respond to opportunities to explore/express their spiritual identities or subjectivities?
- Creative writing
- The visual arts
- Film and drama/theatre

Please submit your proposal – including name, email address, institution, a 150-200 word description and your preferred session format – via email to Dr Sue Yore (s.yore@yorksj.ac.uk).

**Deadline for proposals: Friday 27<sup>th</sup> February 2009.**

**Deadline for registration: Friday 29<sup>th</sup> May 2009.**

For further information and online booking please visit:

**<http://www.c4ccetl.ac.uk>**



# **Changing Academic Practice:**

## **Implications for Future PRS Academics**

**Lincoln EPA Science Centre  
University of Oxford  
February 4<sup>th</sup> 2009**

The Subject Centre for PRS and the Centre for Excellence in Preparing for Academic Practice CETL are holding a colloquium to bring together doctoral students, postdoctoral researchers, and junior and senior academics to explore and discuss the challenges and opportunities for those wishing to prepare for and develop an academic career in Philosophy, History of Science, Philosophy of Science, Biblical Studies, Religious Studies or Theology.

This event is intended to draw together people who are at various stages of developing academic careers in PRS disciplines. The day will allow for a shared awareness of what ‘Academic Practice’ means, in the context of these particular disciplines. Previous events of this kind have proved helpful to participants by providing opportunities for networking; by improving understandings of what academic careers involve; and by offering reassurance that individuals are not alone in facing their challenges. The outcomes of the day are intended to inform efforts to support the next generation of academic staff, and those holding new appointments to academic roles.

Attendance at the event is free, but prior registration is essential. To reserve a place, please contact Richard Arnold on 01865 286828 or [Richard.Arnold@learning.ox.ac.uk](mailto:Richard.Arnold@learning.ox.ac.uk).

Further details and joining instructions will be issued in January 2009.

For more information, please see:

**<http://www.learning.ox.ac.uk/cetl.php?page=54>**

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD



**Preparing  
for Academic  
Practice**

# A Level Above?

## Progression to Undergraduate Studies in Philosophy

### St Anne's College, Oxford

### July 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> 2009

This conference will provide an opportunity for academics, school teachers, exam boards and policy-makers to consider ways to enhance students' progression in philosophical education, with a particular focus on the transition from school or further education (including A Level, Highers, International Baccalaureate and Access courses) to undergraduate level study of Philosophy in the UK.

#### **Confirmed speakers include:**

- John Lippitt, Professor of Ethics and Philosophy of Religion,  
University of Hertfordshire
- Anthony Seldon, Headmaster of Wellington College

#### **Call for proposals**

Proposals are invited for papers / workshops / presentations / discussion groups. Topics may include (but are not restricted to):

- The transition from A Levels, Highers or equivalent to the first year of undergraduate study
- The first year undergraduate experience
- Student / teacher expectations
- New developments in A Levels, Highers, and the 14-19 Diploma
- Assessment and feedback
- Policy and curriculum development
- Resources

Submissions should include your name, email address and institution along with a 150 – 200 word description of your proposal. Please indicate your preferred session format (workshop, PowerPoint presentation, etc.). Conference contributions of a publishable standard may be also considered for inclusion in a future issue of *Discourse: Learning and Teaching in Philosophical and Religious Studies* – please indicate if you would be interested in this opportunity.

To discuss your interest in this conference, or to submit a proposal, please contact Dr Clare Saunders on:

**clare@prs.heacademy.ac.uk.**

**Deadline for proposals: February 23<sup>rd</sup> 2009.**

For more details, visit:

**<http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/view.html/prsevents/420>**

# Do you teach philosophical or religious studies outside a dedicated PRS department?

The Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies (PRS) is beginning a scoping study of PRS provision in non-PRS departments. (PRS subjects include philosophy; theology; religious studies; history and philosophy of science, technology and medicine.)

Just as there are learning and teaching issues that are specific to philosophical and religious studies, and which the Subject Centre for PRS aims to support, we feel there are similar specific issues involved in teaching courses with a PRS element to non-specialists, such as natural and social scientists, literature students, artists or historians. We would like to hear from you if you are teaching PRS subjects outside a philosophy or theology and religious studies department, to find out more about the courses you are teaching or contributing to, and how we might best support you in this.

We aim to produce a map of current provision, an analysis of key learning and teaching issues for this constituency, and, depending on responses received, to initiate special interest groups for PRS academics working outside PRS departments, to facilitate practice-sharing and networking.

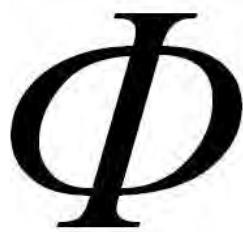
If you are involved in the teaching of philosophical or religious studies in a non-PRS department, and would like to share your experiences and/or to suggest ways in which the Subject Centre for PRS could support you, please email:

**[clare@prs.heacademy.ac.uk](mailto:clare@prs.heacademy.ac.uk).**

For the initial mapping exercise, we are particularly interested in the following:

- What are you teaching and in which department are you teaching it?
- Which academic subject(s) do you identify with?

We would be grateful if you could assist us by disseminating this call as widely as possible to PRS colleagues working outside core PRS departments.



# *Philosophical Writings*

A Journal for Postgraduates and New Academics

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For more information please look at our website:

**<http://www.dur.ac.uk/philosophical.writings/>**

Or email:

**[philosophical.writings@durham.ac.uk](mailto:philosophical.writings@durham.ac.uk)**

Philosophical Writings, Department of Philosophy, 50 Old Elvet, Durham,  
DH1 3HN, Tel: 0191 334 6550, Fax: 0191 334 6551

## **Doing Philosophy: a Practical Guide for Students – out now**

The Philosophy team at the Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies, based at the University of Leeds, have written a new book, a guide to the study of philosophy at university, published by Continuum.

Transition to higher education is acknowledged to be a major issue in terms of academic achievement and student retention, and when it comes to philosophy, students often encounter a very specific set of difficulties in engaging with the subject at undergraduate level. The book tackles barriers to engagement with philosophy in a practical way and emphasises the value of philosophy as an activity to be engaged in.

Reviewers from institutions in the UK and abroad were enlisted in its development, to ensure that the book would have value for those in a variety of philosophy courses. Students were also consulted, with several focus groups being held during the development process. The result is an accessible guide that provides lots of practical suggestions for dealing with the complexity of undergraduate philosophical study.

Professor Helen Beebee, head of the philosophy department at the University of Birmingham, reviewed the book, and says:

This is an excellent book, and I'll definitely be advising my first-year philosophy students to buy it. *Doing Philosophy* basically tells the student beginning philosophy at university everything they need to know. The topics include finding resources, reading philosophy, plagiarism, referencing, taking notes, seminar discussions, and more. In particular, I think the chapter on writing philosophy—and especially the examples of essay questions, together with advice on how to tackle them—will be hugely useful.

Another reviewer, Dr Dave Leal from the University of Oxford, says:

Anyone coming to the study of philosophy at university for the first time will find help here, and some more advanced students might gain from reading it too...by offering a clear account of some of the barriers to successful engagement with philosophical texts and

questions, and helping to overcome them, [the authors] have done a real service.'

Comments from students included:

- 'Better than a study guide...there was so much more to take away from it.'
- 'I think reading it has helped me now...if I'd got it at the beginning of my first year it would've really helped.'
- 'a good introduction to what philosophy requires as opposed to other disciplines.'
- '[written] as though someone is talking to you, taking you through complicated ideas.'

The book is available from all the usual channels, including Amazon, where you can read a sample.

For inspection copies, please contact:

Alison Silver,  
Marketing Department, Continuum,  
The Tower Building, 11 York Road,  
London, SE1 7NX, UK  
Tel: 020 7922 0880 Fax: 020 7928 7894  
Email: **info@continuumbooks.com**  
Website: **http://www.continuumbooks.com**

## **Discussion, Reports, Articles and Practical Teaching**

## The Discourse Interview

# Professor Stanley Hauerwas

## Duke University Divinity School

**Interviewed by: Rebecca O'Loughlin**

Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious  
Studies, Higher Education Academy

Continuing our series of interviews with academics with a special interest in teaching issues, Rebecca O'Loughlin, Academic Co-ordinator for theology at the Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies, talked to Stanley Hauerwas about his theological background, the relationship between theology and religious studies, and the marginalisation of theology in the university. The interview was conducted in Sheffield on 29<sup>th</sup> May 2008.

**Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed by *Discourse*. If I could just begin by asking you about your academic background: to a British audience, your working class roots and former employment as a bricklayer don't make you a classic candidate for a career in**

**academic theology. Could you tell us a little bit about how you became an academic, and how you experienced the transition to academic life?**

I didn't have a career as a bricklayer, but I was raised to be one. In my family that was all we knew, so when I was a very young boy, I was taken out on the job, and I was taught all the skills necessary to become a bricklayer. My father didn't want me to lay bricks until later, because he didn't want me to start making good money for fear I wouldn't want to go to college. I was the first of anyone in my family to go to college.

I decided to study theology because I couldn't get saved. We were part of an evangelical Methodist church where you joined the church on Sunday morning, but you had to be saved on Sunday night, with 45 minutes of hymn singing, an hour sermon and an altar call that lasted forever. I wanted to be saved but it just didn't happen, and I didn't think you should fake it, so finally one night, I thought, if God isn't going to save me, I can dedicate my life to the ministry. At least I'll put God under some constraint.

We had an associate minister at the Church, who had actually gone to college and seminary, and he said, 'Well, you need to read', so I started reading. I read a lot of bad stuff, but then I discovered a book by B. Davie Napier, called *From Faith to Faith*<sup>1</sup>. Now, we weren't smart enough to be fundamentalist, but we believed the Bible was true, and through this book I discovered it wasn't. Secondly I read a book by Nels F. S. Ferre called *The Sun and the Umbrella*<sup>2</sup>, and it suggested that religion probably hid God as much as revealed God, and I thought that's probably right, so I gave it up. That must have been when I was 16 or 17, and I didn't think of myself as a Christian any more but I was still scheduled to go to college, so I did.

I went to South Western University in Georgetown, Texas. It was a small school, and I thought I would major in history, I had no idea why, but I discovered what I really loved was philosophy. There was a wonderful man there, named John Score, who was a theologian, but the college was small and I was the philosophy major, so for six semesters

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<sup>1</sup> Napier, B. Davie, *From Faith to Faith: Essays on Old Testament Literature* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1955).

<sup>2</sup> Ferre, Nels F. S., *The Sun and the Umbrella* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1953).

we read Copelston<sup>3</sup>, with the primaries, and it just was a wonderful preparation. I became increasingly convinced that I didn't know enough to be an atheist, so I started reading and going to other courses that John was teaching on other theologians. I was particularly struck by H. Richard Niebuhr's *The Meaning of Revelation*<sup>4</sup>, and so I decided to go to Yale to find out if that stuff was true! Niebuhr had retired and died the year I got there, but that's how it began, and I've been in it ever since.

**You have been called ‘contemporary theology’s foremost intellectual provocateur’. What do you think about the controversy that your work generates? Do you consider that it’s a sign that you’re doing theology properly?**

I don't like the language of provocateur. I'm oftentimes introduced as being very provocative, and I always tell people, don't tell me I'm provocative. You can say I'm outrageous, wrong etc. but provocative is a liberal word, it means, I understand you better than you probably understand yourself. It means, I'm not really in agreement with you, therefore I'm able to distance myself, which means I finally don't have to take you seriously. So screw provocative! I think that I make a lot of people angry, because I have something to say, and I have something to say because I take Christian convictions seriously and straight up, and that's a very big challenge to Christians, who have spent some generations trying to show the world that we don't have anything to say other than what the world already thinks it knows. I don't try to be controversial, I think that would be a silly stance, but I do seem to have that effect primarily among other Christians. Interestingly enough some of my best readers are secular. They say, this is interesting, I didn't know that Christians had that to say.

**Yes, in ‘The State of the University’<sup>5</sup> you say that as a theologian you are something of a resident alien in academia, so could you talk**

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<sup>3</sup> Copleston, Frederick Charles, *A History of Philosophy* (London: Continuum, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Niebuhr, H. Richard, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: Macmillan, 1941).

<sup>5</sup> Hauerwas, Stanley, *The State of the University: Academic Knowledges and The Knowledge of God* (Malden, MA; Oxford: Blackwell Pub., 2007).

**a little about how someone who's been labelled sectarian, tribalistic and fideistic is so well read in disciplines outside of theology, and has been called the most influential theologian in America today?**

Yeah, I don't know what to make of that, that's Jeff Stout's claim, and I said 'Oh, come on Jeff, being a theologian and being influential is a contradiction in terms, people are not going to take you that seriously'.

If I am read outside the theological world, and I am, I suppose, to some extent, it's because I share the agony of the people who are reading me. By that I mean, when we're doing certain things and we can't explain to ourselves why we're doing them, I look for cracks and the sensibilities of our time to try to help us understand what we're doing. Why do we care for the mentally disabled? Why do we think suicide is wrong? Why do we accept the presumption that violence is more determinative than non-violence? So by taking on questions I maybe don't have the ability to answer, and trying to do it as honestly as I can, I think I attract some people to the kind of work I do. Also, my own thinking is determined primarily by what I read. I'm a reader, and that makes me extraordinarily eclectic, and therefore I think some people read me because of what I read. I've been deeply influenced by Alasdair MacIntyre, for example, and some people who are trying to figure out Alasdair, try to figure out the relationship between Alasdair and myself. Those are the kinds of readerships that I think come not necessarily from the Christian world, but that are still interested.

**So do you think that by refusing to jettison the distinctive language of Christianity, ironically you are more influential than those who have?**

Yes, (laughs) and I don't think it's an irony. I think I've been deeply influenced by Wittgenstein. I never try to look for meaning that is more determinative than what I say, so I try to work in a manner that helps people see the grammar of the faith, and demonstrate how differences in language might matter, so hopefully it's a way of helping people see the significance of not being Christian. I struggled my whole life trying to figure out the significance of being Christian, so if I can help some people see the significance of not being, that would be a very big help.

I'm using 'grammar' in the Wittgensteinian sense, strongly shaped by Herbert McCabe's work. By grammar, I mean how the shape

of sentences in relationship to other sentences determines what I'm saying, and therefore shapes meaning. I think people think that Christianity should be available and understandable without training, and I think training is all there is. So when someone says, 'I can't imagine what you mean when you say Jesus Christ is Lord', I say, 'Well of course you can't, it's taken me 68 years, and I'm still trying. Karl Barth tried for 14 volumes and was still working on it.' And when they say, 'Why would you ever buy into something when you're not sure what you're saying?', the answer is, every indication I have, from significant people who helped me discover what it is I'm saying, is, they live as if it's true, and I try to direct attention to what those conditions are, for truthfulness.

**You've taught at universities in the US throughout your academic career. Could you say a little bit about how university education in the US compares to that in the UK, especially in relation to theology?**

Well, this may be a surprising answer, but I think theology in America suffers from the American penchant to avoid conflict. We're just too damn nice, and I would never accuse the British of that! I often think one of the great scams of modernity is how the British got the reputation for being civil. Who was ever a more bloodthirsty group of killers than the British? I think it makes for a better context for theology in Britain, because there is an engagement in British intellectual life that at least starts from the presumption that you might be wrong. It does mean that universities in Britain are not afraid of controversy, and they don't try to domesticate intellectual disagreements, so if a theologian can make a case, they're open to that. I take it, also, that you've had an ancient tradition in which theology has been recognised as a serious intellectual engagement that isn't just about opinion, and it's not the case that we have that in America. We just don't have the ancient universities. Now I understand, in Britain, how some of the newer universities tended to move more in the religious studies direction, rather than having a strong theological centre, and I regret that. I think that theology needs to be at the heart of any serious engagement with a faith. Christianity may be further along in dying in Great Britain than it is in America, but if that's the case, it's sure as hell producing a won-

derful group of great theologians. It's a wonderful time in Britain right now, in terms of the kinds of people that are around for discussion.

**Could you talk a little bit more about your views on religious studies, and its relationship with theology?**

Well, like so many university disciplines, it's completely incoherent. You don't know what a religion is, and there's no methodology necessarily associated with religious studies that gives it any kind of identity. I think it developed 20 years ago because it was a way that people who had learned a lot of stuff as Christians and didn't like it, but still needed a job, and who had a PhD, could go ahead and continue to be in universities, by teaching about religion. Also it was the attempt to deal with the fact that we suddenly discovered there are a lot of people in the world who aren't Christians, but have seemingly religious points of view that we ought to know about, which I certainly think is true, so I take it as a kind of pragmatic response to those kinds of developments. But my own view is, religious studies departments are where people are hired who are willing to study a religion either that's already dead or so they can kill it, and as a result, I just think they don't produce much interesting work. Who's going to read this? Why is it important? That doesn't mean that there isn't some very good work done in religious studies departments, that should be read, I certainly read a great deal of it. But I asked one of my religious studies colleagues, who studies medieval Judaism, if we could somehow get back Ibn Sina, Maimonides and Aquinas, would he appoint them in religious studies, and he said no. When I asked why not, he said, 'Well, they're confessional thinkers'. Now, how stupid can you get, to not be willing to have an Ibn Sina, a Maimonides or an Aquinas, simply because they were practitioners of what they thought about? I mean, it's very interesting that religious studies oftentimes is still captured by modernist epistemological assumptions that have been given up across the university, and of course, they're still captured by those assumptions because they don't know how to teach undergraduates of diverse backgrounds the seriousness of Islamic or Jewish or Christian accounts of the world, other than, it's a matter of opinion. So the matter of opinion becomes a way of being objective, and a way then you can't expect anyone to take it seriously. It's a big power problem in modern pedagogy.

**So you've said that the next part of your career will focus on education, in particular on the marginalisation of theology in the university. How did this interest develop?**

It's always been there. As I say in the preface to 'The State of the University', my life has been constituted by two primary institutions, the university and the church, and it's partly because I owe so much to both, I want to try to be as good a servant as I can to them, by trying to suggest in what ways I think the modern university has impoverished itself by not having theology as one of the serious subjects of the university curriculum. The problem with the secular is not that it's secular, it's that it's so unbelievably stupid about strong religious traditions. People think that they know what Christianity is because they had to go through some kind of Sunday School, and that is myth. People often times get upset in the States about the religious right. Well, one of the problems with the religious right is that the people so often associated with it don't know dipshit about Christianity, and have no idea about its diversity, its controversies, its wrong steps. I'm trying to avoid language like 'faith traditions', I just hate that, but I think that the world is less able to negotiate difference, exactly because our universities have not had within their core a strong theological presence. I mean, sometimes religious studies academics seem to think that the way you make sure that Catholics are not going to be dogmatic, in the world in which we find ourselves, is to teach them about Buddhism, but they don't know dip about Catholicism, (laughter). I'm not against teaching Buddhism, but it'd be a very good thing to know something about Catholicism.

**Why do you think that theology is no longer considered to be a necessary discipline in the modern university?**

Well, I think there are many reasons, but let me give you one. I think it has to do with Christians being in power, in a way that it was simply assumed that we knew what we were talking about and others didn't, and so we were able to teach, for example, introductory courses in Old Testament, without ever helping students to realise that it's not the Old Testament for Jews. So it was a reinforcement of Constantinian Christianity that was gained through the Church's accommodation to

the powers in a way that we thought our beliefs were simply what anyone would believe on reflection, and so people rightly said that the teaching of theology in universities was coercive. Now that we are losing the power to control our destinies, theology should become more interesting again, but unfortunately people still think this is the case. Where would the secular in America be today without the religious right? That's the spectre that's always there, ready to come down on you, to take all the fun out of life. I just find that silly. The religious right won't last very long, and we need to reclaim what we can do well, in service to the university, in ways that the university can recognise as crucial for the training of people able to live in the world as we know it, without killing. That's part of the problem—the universities don't know what they should be about.

### **What do you think a university is? Or should be?**

It's the memory of people for the discernment of the challenges that memory produces, and there are many different disciplines necessary for the doing of that, but I think that's its fundamental task, and it involves teaching people how to talk, so language is absolutely at the epicentre of that.

### **Do you think that theology will survive in universities?**

I think the interesting question is, whether universities will. I mean, universities which are always ready to be bought by the highest bidder will survive in some form, but I think the question is, whether the essential task of the university can be sustained by a people who live as if they need no memory, and I just don't know the answer to that.

Theology is, first and foremost, the discipline of the church, so the church will always by necessity raise up people who may not be in the university, to do the kinds of work that is demanded by the extraordinary claim that we only know the world had a beginning because we know the end in Jesus Christ. That's an extraordinary set of metaphysical presumptions, so you're always going to need people to know how to think about that, so I don't worry about the future of theology, it may be better done than in universities. But I do think that theology could be a very important discipline, and I even worry about it being a discipline, because we're undisciplined, you've got to take it into the world,

which always lets you know that you'll never know enough to do theology, but I do think theology is exactly the kind of engagement that refuses to let compartmentalisation of the modern world, exemplified and legitimated by the compartmentalisations within the modern university, be legitimate, so we can challenge that in ways that hopefully is of use to the university.

**So, you've said that prayer and theology go together. Does that mean that theology students who don't have any religious beliefs can't do theology?**

No, Gavin D'Costa really debunks that wonderfully, in his book,<sup>6</sup> and much better than I do. No, obviously, non-believers can be really quite exceptional theologians and you can learn a hell of a lot from them, but I do mean, however, that that will not sustain the activity of theology across generations, and so prayer is a fundamental practice. And you've got to remember that what is a liturgy of prayer, from beginning to end, is the necessary practice to locate that theology's about God, it's about a God that we pray to. And that's absolutely at the centre of things, and if you just think it's about belief, then, what good do beliefs do you? It's not about believing in the Virgin birth; it's about praying to Mary. So prayer is my way of suggesting that a Christian theology is about God and that entails practices that make intelligible the activity of theology itself.

**Are there conflicts in teaching theology in a secular institution?**

I like being at a secular university. I was at Notre Dame for years, and it was wonderful, I'm forever indebted to them for letting me be there, but there you had the impression that theology was at the centre of the universe, and you never get that idea at Duke. And so, I find that wonderfully freeing, and I love interacting with secular colleagues, in terms of what I can learn from them, and hopefully every once in a while I might have something to teach them.

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<sup>6</sup> D'Costa, Gavin, *Theology in the Public Square: Church, Academy, and Nation*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).

**So, if we talk about theology students, have they changed, over your time as an academic?**

I don't have wide experience. At Notre Dame I was teaching Roman Catholics, and at Duke I mainly teach people going into the Ministry, of various Protestant denominations, primarily Methodist. What has changed, since I've been at Duke, and I can only speak about that, is they are a hell of a lot smarter and they're younger, and Duke has a good reputation for being a serious intellectual centre for Christian theology, and so we're attracting very good students, and I'm very glad that that's the case. One of the things that is happening is that many of these students come from secular backgrounds, and they discovered Christianity along the way, and they really are absolutely enthralled, and they may think they want to go into the ministry, but they're not necessarily associated with any Church, and so that's a very interesting set of developments.

**What happens after they graduate?**

Some of them go into different professions, some of them find a church. Many of them are attracted to the Episcopal Church, but given the conditions of the Episcopal Church in America it's no easy matter to get ordained.

**So finally, looking back over your career, who or what have been the greatest influences on your academic career?**

Well certainly Karl Barth, Thomas Aquinas, Augustine. And it doesn't often show but Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, MacIntyre, and John Howard Yoder; they've all had very significant influence on me. A thinker that also doesn't show as much, is Sheldon Wolin, an American political theorist, who I've learned much from. In the UK, certainly Rowan Williams has been a big influence, as well as Herbert McCabe, Fergus Carr, Nicholas Lash—I've learned a hell of a lot from them.

**Thankyou very much for talking to us.**

Thank you.

# A Report into the Issues Surrounding the Progression of Students to Undergraduate Studies with Particular Reference to GCE RS and Undergraduate TRS

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**Natasha Pyne**

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In 2007, the Subject Centre for Philosophy and Religious Studies commissioned a report to investigate some of the issues arising out of student transition to undergraduate studies with particular reference to from GCE Religious Studies (RS) to undergraduate Theology and Religious Studies (TRS).

I began my research into issues or problems arising from GCE

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RS progression to undergraduate TRS the usual way, that is, a quick but thorough search of journal articles and books. Not only did this produce little response, I realised that this type of report was not to be a means to an end in itself. Rather, it should be a springboard into the unacknowledged and sometimes unknown lands of student voices, experiences and opinions concerning studying for a TRS degree. Of the educator's, that is, teacher's, tutor's, lecturer's and careers guidance advisor's, experiences of guiding GCE and first year students to a fulfilling, meaningful and useful academic journey. Of the way in which TRS departments recruit, support and maintain students via prospectuses, posters, visits to schools and how a subject not known for its acceptance or full use of next generation tools is coping to attract and retain students in a booming digital age.<sup>1</sup>

As with any academic journey, the finished product, in this case a report, is not always the end of the voyage and so it was with this report. A shortened version was given as a paper at the well-received conference 'Spoon-Feeding or Critical Thinking? A Level / Higher to First Year Progression in Religious Studies and Theology' in Oxford, July 2008. It also raised interest surrounding departmental use of the Internet and the need for more guidance, training, and practice in employing the web and its software as a means to reach out and connect with potential students as well as building upon and been further informed by established student communities within the department.

Initially it was difficult to find tested and reliable data specific to GCE RS and TRS. Nevertheless, much information can be gleaned from the reports of those examination boards who offer RS GCE. This was then supplemented by examination reports from the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA), Edexcel, Oxford, Cambridge and RSA Examinations (OCR), Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment for Northern Ireland (CCEA), and reports on Religious Education by Ofsted and the Religious Education Council of England and Wales. Whilst this gave an overview of the quality of papers being

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<sup>1</sup> Meriel Patrick has written an informative article in *Discourse* concerning resources for philosophy and TRS on the Internet, 'Best of the Web: Internet Resources for Philosophy and TRS', *Discourse*, vol.6 no.2, Spring 2007, pp.11-17.  
<http://www.prs.heacademy.ac.uk/view.html/PrsDiscourseArticles/7>

written in examinations, it hardly allowed for the experiences of the tutors, teachers and indeed, the students themselves. Consequently, two online questionnaires were created in order to capture student experience but unfortunately, both were restricted by a short time frame and were only online for thirty-four days in total.<sup>2</sup>

The questionnaire aimed to gather general information about student motivations to study RS, learning experiences, use of resources including the Internet and set texts, and the expectations students held at the beginning and the end of their RS A2 study. Out of the 72 schools targeted for the GCE questionnaire, 35 students responded.

The second questionnaire was more reflective in its approach, raising questions relating to the ability of the A2 RS curriculum and teaching practices to successfully prepare students for undergraduate studies, the use of learning and e-learning resources and some of the key motivations and motivators that lay behind studying TRS. This questionnaire was intentionally aimed at second year TRS undergraduates, as they would have had time and the skills to reflect upon their undergraduate transition period. Recruiting from three regional TRS departments, the University of Leeds, York St John and Trinity and All Saints University College, enabled access to a potential audience of 45 students and out of those, 27 second year undergraduates responded.

In addition, an opportunity arose to discuss progression issues with undergraduate TRS students when the Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies (PRS) organised a one-day nationwide philosophy and theology/religious studies focus group in 2007.<sup>3</sup> With 11 students participating, one session was devoted to exploring student experiences of GCE and Highers and comprised

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<sup>2</sup> Initially there were three questionnaires, each one asking about the needs of the three main groups affected by first year TRS progression, that is, GCE religious educators, GCE A2 RS students and TRS undergraduates. Unfortunately, the RS teacher questionnaire that sought to evaluate RS teaching practice, technological expertise, curriculum and teacher relationships with the four main examining boards was abandoned due to time constraints.

<sup>3</sup> Lamb, D. and Saunders, C., ‘What Do Our Students Really Think? Report on A Student Focus Group’, *Discourse* vol.6 no.2, Spring 2007. This report can be downloaded in pdf format at:

<http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/view.html/PrsDiscourseArticles/10>

three reflective written tasks, several group discussions and two short student-led presentations. Although the questionnaires and the focus group session allowed the students to have a voice in what they believed to be the key factors to a successful transition, it has to be noted that the results from the focus group and the questionnaires were not always in agreement!

## The status of TRS at undergraduate level

The 2000-2001 inspections held by the QAA examined all undergraduate TRS courses in Northern Ireland and England. The findings showed that overall:

- Most TRS undergraduate departments were showing signs of a concerted effort to improve the structure and delivery of courses, with teaching and learning strategies implemented and good practice being observed in the majority of institutions.<sup>4</sup>
- Women are still more likely than men to study a TRS degree.<sup>5</sup>
- In TRS at least, progression and retention rates are high, with approximately ninety percent of TRS students progressing onto their second year.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the debate about ethnicity in relation to recruitment and retention in TRS remains largely unexplored or in some cases relegated to the margins.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Subject Overview Report, Theology and Religious Studies, QO2/2001*, (QAA: (The Quality Assurance for Higher Education) 2001) point 14 ff.

**[http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/reports/subjectlevel/qo2\\_01.pdf](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/reports/subjectlevel/qo2_01.pdf)**

<sup>5</sup> In 2001, approximately 65% of students embarking on TRS undergraduate studies were female. (*Subject Overview Report, Theology and Religious Studies, QO2/2001* (QAA: 2001), point 20). However, this trend can be traced back to RE at GCSE level where the gap between male and female attainment is larger in RE than in any other subject, yet, underachieving boys profess an interest in RE. (*Making Sense of Religion, A Report on Religious Education in Schools and the Impact of Locally Agreed Syllabuses*, (Ofsted, 2007), point 26 and 29.)

<sup>6</sup> *Subject Overview Report, Theology and Religious Studies, QO2/2001*, (QAA: 2001), point 22.

Good practice found in TRS departments included the constructive use of:

- Open days
- Information packs for prospective students
- Introductory sessions that included information about or introducing the person responsible for student welfare etc.
- Existence of a strong academic support network
- Effective personal tutor systems
- Good quality pastoral support which showed an awareness of the importance behind encouraging students to have a positive sense of self and well-being<sup>8</sup>
- Efficient, informed and pro-active career guidance including input from outside agencies and businesses
- Flexibly scheduled and repeated IT and library inductions
- Enough set texts available for loan in the university library
- Free access to relevant TRS online journals
- Good quality teaching spaces, including the use of teaching aids and tools such as laptop power points, overhead projectors, etc
- Social groups and networking opportunities within and outside of the department
- Easy registration processes with friendly trained, approachable and accessible staff
- Specific material meeting the needs of international students and mature students
- Financially enabling or assisting towards, childcare provision<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> An example of sidestepping the ethnicity and undergraduate theology issue can be found in the QAA's *Subject Overview Report*, point 20, where, rather than engage in why EMG are so poorly represented in TRS (despite high attendance to churches and other religious institutions), the report infers that it is more a matter of location rather than ignorance surrounding the importance of identity and theology in the UK or the lack of course options and modules in established Black theologies in the UK.

<sup>8</sup> Michie, F., Glachan, Frances, M. and Bray, D., 'An Evaluation of Factors Influencing the Academic Self-concept, Self-Esteem and Academic Stress for Direct and Re-entry Students in Higher Education', *Educational Psychology*, 21:4, (2001), pp. 455-472, p.458. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01443410120090830>

The following are examples of good practice in TRS teaching and learning informed primarily by reports from several examining bodies, SACRE reports and confirmed by the focus group and the questionnaire results:

- Lucid and focused learning objectives and outcomes<sup>10</sup>
- Informed, rich, diverse and challenging curricula which reflect and *engage* with the political and cultural diversity found in the UK<sup>11</sup>
- Well delivered and informed lectures and seminar groups which involve a wide range of learning formats that reflect the needs of the Net Generation. Examples would include more encouragement for multi-media images with an audio and visual soundtrack to be part of course assessment or group presentations, for teaching styles to encourage the students to be more actively engaged in tasks and to acknowledge the preference of Net Generation students and therefore potential undergraduates to work in groups as they regard social interaction as a high priority in teaching and learning
- For course work, presentations and dissertations assessments to be a combination of oral or written exams
- Enthusiastic and informed lecturers
- Prompt and accurate oral and written feedback about assessments
- Encouragement for, and opportunity to show, independent learning
- External markers to second mark essays and blind marking of papers
- Sympathetic and informed student guidance and support<sup>12</sup>
- Informed careers guidance and accessible information relating to employment<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *Subject Overview Report, Theology and Religious Studies, QO2/2001*', (QAA: 2001), point 27.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, point 32.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, conclusions b.

<sup>12</sup> Interestingly this aspect of TRS undergraduate studies came out top in the QAA report with 95 % of departments achieving a grade 4. *Subject Overview Report, Theology and Religious Studies, QO2/2001*, (QAA: 2001), point 46.

The findings from the questionnaires and the focus group confirmed several universal issues that may be encountered by any potential transition student. These included:

- Issues surrounding the quality and availability of career guidance advisors
- The stigma attached to clearing students as well as the clearing process itself
- Issues surrounding ethnic minority grouping (EMG)
- Finance and employment
- Gender
- Perceived or real inferior standard of study skills
- Motivations to study, which also include the personal development aims and achievements of students
- The quality of previous learning and teaching experiences
- The quality of academic support

## **Issues surrounding TRS and ethnicity**

Unlike a recent survey by the HEA, the category ‘white/non-white’ was not used as ‘non-white’ has been criticized by leading black sociologists, commentators, Womanists and Black theologians as a pejorative label and serves only to further alienate students of black and mixed-heritage ethnicity.<sup>14</sup> In both questionnaires, the ethnicity

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<sup>13</sup> QAA, Ibid, point 30 and one example of accurate and current information on TRS and employment is The Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies employability guide which was sent out to interested TRS departments and is available on line as a pdf. SC for PRS, ‘Employability, Where next? Unlocking The Potential of Your Theology or Religious Studies Degree’, (2007) [http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/publications/emp\\_guide\\_for\\_web.pdf](http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/publications/emp_guide_for_web.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> HEA, ‘The First Year Experience of Higher Education in the UK, Final Report,’ (January 2008), p. 16.

**<http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/research/surveys/FYE/FYEFinalReport.pdf>**

Critique on the use of the term ‘non-white’ include the works of P. Gilroy, *There Ain’t No Black in The Union Jack, The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation*, (Routledge: 1987), b. hooks (sic), *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, (Southend Press: 1992) and J. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, (J B Lippincott: 1970).

categories were broken into fourteen groups with an option to refuse information if required.<sup>15</sup> The National Student Survey confirmed the importance of breaking ethnicities into relevant and accurate groupings in that its findings revealed that Black African students were less positive about their experiences of undergraduate study than those who were Black Caribbean.<sup>16</sup> If the category had merely been ‘Black’, this would have remained unknown.

Predictably the overwhelming ethnicity of those surveyed in the undergraduate questionnaire was White British, despite legislation, reviews, reports, and yet more studies.

In higher education, reports confirm that ethnic minorities are receiving lower than *expected* grades.<sup>17</sup> In addition, the number of Black British students who apply and are accepted for degrees, in particular TRS, remains low, despite high attendance to Black churches in the United Kingdom and attempts to raise the profile of potential Black British students to undergraduate TRS by prominent Black British theologians and pastors. Unfortunately, but alas predictably, the questionnaire reflected the current student situation in that the ethnic majority was White British with Black British Caribbean and Asian British Pakistani in the minority.

## **Demographic information collected from the students**

Results from the undergraduate questionnaire revealed that, in this survey at least, Theology single honours was statistically the most

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<sup>15</sup> The categories were as follows: Asian or Asian British – Indian, Asian or Asian British – Pakistani, Asian or Asian British – Bangladeshi, Black or Black British – Caribbean, Black or Black British – African, Black or Black British – Other, Chinese, White British, White – Other, Mixed-White & Black Caribbean, Mixed-White & Black African, Mixed-White & Asian Other, Mixed background – Other ethnic background, Not known and Information refused.

<sup>16</sup> Surridge, P., *The National Student Survey 2006: Summary Report, A Report to the Higher Education Funding Council for England*, (2007).

<sup>17</sup> The Higher Education Academy, ‘The Final Report’, (2008)

<http://www.bath.ac.uk/hr/equalities/ethnicitygenderdegreeattainmentreport.pdf>

popular degree followed by joint honours Theology with a strong bias towards Theology and Religious Studies and Theology and Primary Education. One of the perpetually advertised strengths of studying TRS at degree level is that it lends itself to interdisciplinary subjects and this was reflected in the joint honours TRS degree where the second area of study included business management, music and philosophy.<sup>18</sup>

## Motivations to study GCE RS

The primary motivations to study GCE RS were linked to previous good teaching and learning experiences at GCSE level. Another popular motive for opting to study GCE RS was its relevance to modern societies, closely followed by the opportunity to study different religions. It is important to note that even at GCE level, students were planning on studying undergraduate TRS. This would suggest that TRS departments would do well to create or further relationships with sixth forms and colleges to access this potential audience. Results from the questionnaire and the focus group also showed that there is a tendency of students to choose GCE RS in the belief that it would complement their other GCE options as well as to inform or encourage their own faith.

## Undergraduate TRS

Linking the material gained from the focus group with journal articles

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<sup>18</sup> For example, undergraduate RS at the University of Leeds is advertised as incorporating approaches from disciplines such as Anthropology, History, Sociology, Textual Studies, Theology, and Philosophy.

**<http://www.leeds.ac.uk/trs/>**

The Department of Theology at Exeter University proposes that students who study for a Theology degree will inevitably draw upon ‘a wide range of intellectual disciplines: History, Languages, Philosophy, Sociology, Cultural Studies, Art History, and others’ **<http://www.huss.ex.ac.uk/theology/ug/index.htm>**.

At York St John, a Theology joint honours degree includes resources from Communication, Counselling Studies, English Literature and Film Studies.

**[http://www2.yorksj.ac.uk/apps/Site/Prospectus/default.asp?Course\\_ID=375](http://www2.yorksj.ac.uk/apps/Site/Prospectus/default.asp?Course_ID=375)**

and the results of the questionnaires it is possible to break down the motivations of students to study TRS at undergraduate level into four main categories

- School based encouragements and experiences
- Academic resources, incentives, and indirect experiences and influence
- Employment prospects
- Personal

## **School based encouragements and experiences**

It is an established fact that good teaching and learning experiences can have a profound impact on student attitudes towards further study, which subjects to choose, and student achievement levels and this was confirmed by the experiences of the questioned TRS students.

It would seem that over half (66%) of the students questioned said that it was their good experiences at GCE level that motivated them to opt for further TRS study at undergraduate level. Although family influence was an important contributing factor, it seemed that, of those questioned, family influence did not equate to family *pressure* and students appeared to show no resentment towards family involvement in their choice of study.

Results from both questionnaires and the focus group revealed that the questioned TRS undergraduates said that they would go to their GCE RS teacher *before* career guidance advisors and students themselves were acutely aware of the difference that good teaching can make upon their own academic understanding and future achievements.

To sum up, TRS material gathered suggests that family encouragement did not amount to family pressure and good teaching and learning practices by GCE RS teachers are intrinsic to a successful transition between GCE RS to TRS. Other issues raised by students included the disappearing role of student advisors as a legitimate point of contact when choosing which degree or where to study and the potential impact of school expectations to undermine student aspirations of undergraduate studies.

## Why study undergraduate TRS?

According to the questionnaires and the focus group the key academic factor to studying TRS at undergraduate level was to deepen understanding of other faiths followed by the desire to study different religions. The small number of the sample will of course have affected this result and factors such as whether the student was studying a RS or Theology degree may have affected the results. However, it seems that TRS students have a genuine interest in other faiths and cultures and this may influence which institution the student chooses.

## Academic motivations

It was surprising how many students chose TRS at undergraduate level because they thought it would complement their other subjects, although which subjects were never specified. It was interesting to note that a continuing belief is evident, from GCE through to degree level, about the interdisciplinary nature of TRS. Further academic motivations include the challenge of detailed text work, interestingly an issue often identified in English Literature as a factor for further study.

The candour of the students was appreciated—a small amount of students rated TRS as an ‘easy’ option for undergraduate studies although in the focus group discussion this was amended to the fact that they had thought it would be easy but it turned out to be ‘hard but fun!’ Nevertheless, other more positive motivations included the wish to clarify personal beliefs and to encourage and inform their own beliefs. It would be interesting to ascertain, in a longer study than was possible here, to what extent those beliefs are challenged or clarified as the degree progresses and which religion or denominations students belonged to (if any), however, additional motivators also included wanting to study in a similar faith environment and the relevancy of TRS to modern society.

When given an opportunity to say in their own words the personal motivations behind TRS study at undergraduate level students spoke more about the following as key motivators:

- To understand other faiths and cultures
- To understand people and the way in which society works
- To contextualise religions and its role in society
- To inform own beliefs
- To study the subject in greater detail
- To study the interactions between politics, religion and society

## **Factors which influence choice and place of TRS study**

### **UCAS website**

Most of the undergraduates questioned had used the UCAS website as part of their research into which course or institution they wished to attend and it was generally agreed to be a useful resource and helpful when applying for and choosing a desirable university. Broadsheet ranking systems of the top 100 universities, however, did not figure highly in resources that assisted choice. Of more importance to student decision about where and what to study was the course *content* and this was found to be of more importance than university entry requirement or university location.

### **Staff profiles**

Staff interests and research were not influencing factors to undergraduate choice of course or institution and it may be that this type of information is more important to postgraduates, as, potential undergraduates are unaware or unused to the demands on staff to be involved in research as well as teaching.

### **Department websites**

Clearly, the university and department website is one important way for potential undergraduates to access TRS information and resources.

However, it would be wise for departments to realise the full potential of their websites and to understand that the department webpage is not just a way of giving potential students information but a way in which students can relate *to* and create an identity *with* the department. A brief exploration into twenty TRS departments online revealed a catalogue of technical and grammatical mistakes, such as out of date information concerning programmes of study, staff profiles and contact details. There was also a distinct lack of ethnic diversity in the pictures used to represent generalised happy TRS students, and many other missed opportunities to connect in a more meaningful way with students.

Most sites underused web technology and TRS departments would do well to explore resources and software that engage students by capturing student experiences in a more meaningful way. Suggestions would include using tools such as Photo Story 3 or iMovie to give a range of short reflective digital stories, to articulate current and past student reflections and experiences of seminar debates or reading a particularly challenging text for example. This software is at its most effective when explaining or exploring an academic metanoia moment or experience and can be used to connect with potential and established students in a more meaningful way than pictures, power point displays and audio. Samples of lectures, and podcasts of debates and discussions, could be placed online as well as student/department committee meetings and any changes that ensued because of student participation, examples of student-led groups and TRS in the community, and a selection of real or ideal graduate e-portfolios.

### **University prospectuses**

Results from both questionnaires and the focus group highlighted the importance to potential students of the university prospectus and open days—they were a high priority for potential students in deciding where to study. It is, therefore, essential that departments make the best use of their prospectuses to attract their audience. Students do look at the prospectuses and do use them as the basis for attending open days, and research has shown that students will use them as a visual and textual reference guide, reminding the potential student not only which institution offers which courses but also their *experiences* of that particular TRS open day.

## **TRS department open days**

Research has shown that good experiences at open days are intrinsically important to the decision making progress for potential students. TRS departments can make sure that open days run smoothly by showing good time management and adhering to a previously arranged timeframe.

Informal research has shown that students find that open days that include a mixture of interactive sessions left them with positive feelings towards the department and the courses on offer, even if the interactive sessions were not directly related to any particular course. This is, in part, due to the shared identity that is created in such sessions and that students can contribute to, as well as be informed by, such sessions. All members of the department need to be informed and prepped for the open day, *including non-academic staff*, as evidence suggests that a poor reception by *any* member of staff towards potential students can negatively sway decisions against studying at that particular institution. It seems unnecessary to say that all advertising, handouts and other forms of literature associated with open days should be inclusive, current and easy to read with clearly signposted links for further information and yet students have spoken about badly produced and inaccurate literature given to them at such events.

Open days are an ideal opportunity for sixth formers and college students to explore and experience university life and as such sample lectures are very popular with GCE students as well as a visit to the student union and library. This type of opportunity to experience academic endeavour is of particular importance to those students who had little or no experience of higher education.

Of the students sampled, all were acutely aware that good relations between staff and students are vital to the learning process. Well thought-out and informative websites are one way to create a sense of shared identity between department and student and with the addition of blogs, students can create several TRS based identities between themselves if they choose to do so. Websites also show how adept the department is in its use of technology, an important factor even in TRS, as well as a tool to convey information about course details and important academic dates.

In conclusion, questionnaire results highlighted that the

university prospectus is viewed by students as more than just a guide to the institution and its courses on offer. The departmental prospectus will also be used as a visual stimulus to recollect the formal and informal experiences of the prospective student. Although an easily dismissed element of the prospectus it is important to realise that for the students questioned, the atmosphere of a department was rated as more important than the academic reputation of individual lecturers and students are more motivated to choose a department by course content than location or the reputation of the institution. Clearly, departments need to do more to recruit and retain potential students than provide tea, coffee and an informal chat at their open days.

## **Employment**

Similar to other disciplines, a degree is understood as one way of increasing job opportunities, yet the primary employment motivation behind studying for a TRS degree was to obtain a teaching qualification, with secondary teaching as the most popular choice. Students were asked which jobs they believed were best suited for TRS graduates and they suggested the following (in order of preference)

- Teaching
- Lecturer in higher education
- Faith guidance advisors/chaplaincy advisors
- Counselling
- Civil service/ clergy/ community work in multi-faith centres or politics
- Armed forces/ campaign and human rights worker, such as Amnesty International / charity work /care work/ marketing or historian
- Advancement in own faith community (although neither role nor faith community specified)
- Personal reasons

## **RS GCE student opinions**

A series of questions were given to GCE students asking them to compare their experiences at AS and A2 levels in an attempt to

ascertain which skills students believed they had gained from studying RS GCE. Results indicated that, of those questioned, A2 GCE RS students:

- Felt more capable of locating key arguments in academic texts
- Felt strongly that they were more capable of writing essays using critical arguments at A2 than they had been at AS level
- Were more confident in writing a précis
- Felt that their basic study skills were of a high standard

RS GCE students found that by A2 they were:

- More able to manage their time effectively
- More confident in working in large groups
- Much more able to work in smaller groups
- Much more confident in giving individual presentations
- Very confident in showing two or more aspects about RS
- Very confident that they possessed a good overview of RS at this level

Clearly, the students questioned had learnt key skills surrounding group work and group dynamics as well as skills surrounding time management.

## TRS Undergraduates

The TRS questionnaire aimed at second year undergraduates gave similar results to the GCE questionnaire results with most students in agreement that they are now:

- More knowledgeable about religions in the UK
- More able to make critical assessments of religious rituals and attitudes
- More able to make critical assessments of faith and believers
- More knowledgeable about the relationship between religion and politics
- More knowledgeable about world religions

- More knowledgeable about philosophy of religion

However, these results were not unanimous and many students opted to be neutral about whether or not they were more knowledgeable about NAR, Philosophy and local religious beliefs and customs. There was some disagreement surrounding to what extent undergraduate students felt able to enter into discussions surrounding politics, religion and science. When asked about the depth and quality of their study skills, undergraduate responses were, in the main, positive with over half agreeing that they felt that they were now more confident and efficient in:

- Locating key texts arguments in texts
- Organising note taking in lectures and seminars
- Managing challenging texts and opinions
- Contributing meaningfully in seminar discussions
- Conveying two or more aspects of their TRS studies
- Thinking independently

However, discussions with the student focus group surrounding the effectiveness of GCE RS in preparing students for undergraduate TRS painted a different picture, perhaps in part, due to the informal approach in which students felt more able to articulate some of their experiences and views.

### **'Spoon-feeding'**

The focus group revealed that 'spoon-feeding' (students own words) at GCE and GCE RS in particular, made the first year of undergraduate study more difficult. Students commented on the way in which their lack of independent thinking and learning skills became quickly apparent in semester one when students began to write essays, select key texts to critique and participate in seminar groups. Most students felt overwhelmed by the expectations of having to write and read in a critical manner and some said that they were glad that their first year marks did not count.

## **Pastoral and academic departmental care**

The focus group and questionnaire students recognised that the way in which TRS departments deal with student problems could either assist or hinder a successful transition. One student commented on the way in which her department ‘...made it a priority that undergraduate students in their first year could feel comfortable...’ Another student spoke about the detrimental effects to her studies when there is a lack of support by departments when things go wrong.

It seemed that most departments offer a draft essay review service and rather than a purely administrative role this is understood by students to be essential contact time with the tutor. As such, the students questioned commented on how such contact was an essential help to student academic progression as well as student well-being. In those places where this service was not offered, it was felt to contribute to feelings of academic isolation as well as stunting opportunities for self-reflection and academic critical assessment of their work.

Both TRS and RS questionnaire results initially suggested that students have a positive attitude toward the effectiveness of RS to prepare them for undergraduate TRS. RS GCE satisfactorily equipped students with skills to understand, construct and write critical arguments and gave further insights into the subject. Although in the *minority*, comments in the TRS questionnaire included concern about:

- The lack of continuity between GCE RS and TRS
- The limited nature of the GCE curriculum to fully prepare potential undergraduate students
- The fact based nature of GCE RS becoming problematic especially when facing a more investigative and evaluative approach inherent in a TRS degree

For those TRS undergraduates who took part in the focus group, the difficulties faced by student transition from GCE to undergraduate studies was further exacerbated by:

- Insufficient study skills
- Spoon-feeding at GCE level
- A lack of training in critical and independent learning
- A lack of continuity between GCE and undergraduate studies

- Compared to GCE, the limited contact between tutors and students

## Recommendations

### Careers guidance officers

Alongside GCE RS teachers, career guidance officers should be the first point of call for potential TRS students. With students showing as early as their first year in RS GCE that they wish to study TRS at undergraduate level, it is imperative that careers officers should be allocated sufficient time in their working week to:

- Forge relationships with all their students
- Familiarize themselves with that year's TRS undergraduate course literature
- Be able to attend workshops and open days
- Forge links with TRS departments

### GCE RS teachers

Whilst GCE RS and TRS teaching and learning standards have improved enormously, and congratulations are due to those members of staff who work so hard to provide such high standards, bodies such as Ofsted believe that more needs to be done. Certainly, the focus group highlighted the importance of GCE RS teachers as initial points of reference for potential TRS students. GCE RS teachers need to be teachers who have specialized in TRS; it is shocking that even now there are RE teachers who have no TRS qualification. Therefore, recommendations include the need for RS GCE educators to:

- Have a TRS undergraduate qualification as well as a teaching certificate
- Be kept up-to-date with current TRS course content
- Have free access to relevant periodicals and other areas of TRS research and interests
- Take part in an on-line community which would be open to TRS university staff

In addition, TRS departments need to further relationships with local sixth forms and colleges that offer GCE RS and Access courses. It is important for such departments to supply this audience with specifically designed open days, handouts and other such materials, as well as give mini-seminars and open discussion groups.

### **The clearing process**

The clearing process is tasked with placing those students whose first choice for study is no longer available in institutions that still have some places available. Recent reports have questioned the appropriateness and timing of such a system. However, for the purpose of this study, it is enough to suggest that clearing students may be more vulnerable in their first year, having not originally intended to study at the university, and may suffer some of the issues arising from early walker syndrome. It must be remembered that early exits in clearing students are exacerbated by the course of study not having been the initial choice of the student. Recommendations would include the need for:

- All staff to be aware of clearing students and the additional factors that may affect this particular group of vulnerable students such as, unscheduled or poorly managed changes in the timetable, and mismanaged administration.
- More training offered to clearing officers who have to cope with distraught students and/or parent(s). The (overly) hasty matching to cope with the volume of callers may be inappropriate for that student and in the long-term, counterproductive. With RS GCE students in particular, care has to be taken that potential TRS students do not end up opting for, for example, an RS degree when their interests lie more in Theology.
- More information available which counteracts the myth that clearing students are more likely to fail.

### **EMG**

It is very difficult to evaluate the effect of belonging to an EMG on a

successful progression into TRS undergraduate studies due to the lack of EMG participation. Recommendations would include a full investigation into the lack of EMG in undergraduate TRS and the results used to formulate guidelines to all UK TRS departments advising on issues ranging from advertising to course content.

### **Gender**

It is recommended that there should be further investigation into why, at TRS undergraduate level, students are, in the main, female. It would be interesting to find out the reasons why at GCSE level there is a lot of interest shown by (white) boys in the themes and topics arising out of their study yet this interest does not encourage male students to go into undergraduate TRS. The roles and grades of female lecturers in TRS study would also be of interest for further study.

### **Study Skills**

Although most TRS students, on entering undergraduate study, appear to be enthusiastic, motivated and focused, it is poor study skills that cause the most anxiety amongst students and if not counteracted may lead to the student leaving their course. Most TRS departments are aware of this and have study skills as part of the first year course but perhaps it would be a more efficient use of time and skills for students to arrive with these skills well honed.

### **Websites**

Departments also need to update and, in some cases, re-design their web sites and include more imaginative use of technology and software including podcasts, seminar downloads and digital stories.

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# The Challenges of A-level RE: A View From the Trenches

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**I**t was a great honour to be asked to speak at the conference, and to contribute to this journal, and also, I felt, a great surprise. The surprise lies in the fact that, as a classroom teacher and head of department in a comprehensive school, I feel that I only have a very limited strategic vision for RE; I know what I know very well, but even as a member of a Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education (SACRE), I don't really have the 'big vision' that I had thought was required to produce a paper like this. This is the origin of the 'trench' analogy that I refer to in my title. From my perspective, if you are involved in policy making—either through the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) or the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), then your view is like a satellite photograph of Europe; spanning an enormous area, the perfect position from which to

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make far-reaching strategic decisions. (This position does have the disadvantage that you are very long way indeed from whatever is actually happening on the ground!) If, on the other hand, you are a university academic, then your view is like that of the artillery observer flying over the battlefield; much more close up than the previous view; combining a fairly good awareness of what is happening on the ground with a good grasp of medium term strategy (you can see over the hills and forests that the troops on the ground can't). This view is not without its frustrations however; the observer will say 'Why can't A company reach that point?' as to him it seems an obvious, clear route; but he can't see the concertinas of barbed wire and hidden snipers dug in. As the title of this paper suggests, in this analogy RE A-level teachers are like the infantry in the trenches; very closely engaged with what is going on, but with very little strategic vision at all—we can't see what is happening in no man's land! This analogy has other facets; we don't know what is happening in the next trench along (there is very rarely any opportunity for us to get together and share good practice), and of course, there is a lot of shouting, and people running round in circles!

We may usefully compare this to the episode in 'All Quiet on the Western Front' when the protagonist, Paul Baumer returns home. Here he discusses the progress of the war in his local pub, and is told that everybody there has a clearer idea of what is going on because they read the papers, and aren't limited in their view. So it is for RE teachers—limited strategic vision. The infantry are also on the receiving end of some seemingly random incoming—there are the trench mortars of government initiatives, and the day to day sniping of school policies, never mind the simple business of maintaining the trench—remember that there are very few heads of department for whom RE A level is their only, or indeed primary, concern (if you compare the competing needs of 30 A level students with 250 GCSE you can see what the number one priority has to be).

However, using such a grim analogy does not mean that it is all doom and gloom—victory is possible even from the trenches. In this paper I want to avoid a litany of complaint, and ensure that I put forward some ideas that might help us all work together for the benefit of all our students.

I thought that the title of conference was very interesting. 'Spoonfeeding or Critical Thinking' contains a clear implication that

‘Spoon feeding (i.e. breaking things down to make them easy) is bad’, and we want to avoid it—‘Critical thinking (i.e. students being responsible, individually accountable academics) is good’ and we want to encourage it. I do feel that there is a subtext present, and developed by some speakers from the university sector at the conference, that ‘In the past students came up to university with all the skills that they needed, but now the schools aren’t preparing them properly anymore’. Of course, in many respects this is true, but I hope that this paper will be able to suggest some of the reasons why that might be the case, as well as another way of approaching this whole issue—not as either /or but as a continuum of development.

For me the key question that we need to ask ourselves if we are going to move forward is: *What is the purpose of A level RE?* What is it *for*?

Once upon a time, everything was comparatively clear; A-level theology was there to prepare you for studying theology at university, as part of a clear process; brighter academic students did O-levels (and of course we should remember that most students did not), which prepared them by giving them the skills that they needed to do A-levels, which in turn prepared them, quite directly, for university. This process in the subject of ‘theology’ was generally understood to prepare them in turn, for the Christian ministry. Over time, this simple, linear model has become more complex. To start with, GCSEs are for students of nearly all ability, not for just the academic elite, and their very specific skills focus means that they do not really do a terribly good job of preparing students for A-level study. The nature of the A-level courses themselves has changed; as well intentioned individuals added bits and pieces. This was partly to reflect the changes in academia as religious studies began to branch off as a distinct subject from theology (although as one might expect there are a lot of permeable boundaries there), and there were also conscious attempts to broaden the A-level subject’s appeal, to make it more relevant; less ‘fuddy-duddy’ and more ‘cool, hip and groovy’—so to the original biblical studies and church history over time we have added the philosophy of religion, then ethics, eventually even a limited study of ‘other religions’, and most recently ‘Religion and the Media’!

We know from our own experience that this process of adding bits and pieces here and there in response to change is not the most suc-

cessful way to create something beautiful or efficient. Think about the back of your lovely new computer—just a few wires connecting you to your external devices, and everything neat and tidy. We all know that the back of our fantastic new machine will, after a year or so, look like a technological plate of spaghetti—as we struggle to keep up to date with changing technology, we add things on & bodge it with work-arounds. The result is not pretty, although it does work—sort of, most of the time! This is a good analogy for A-level as it has been very interesting to see the way that different boards have responded to the challenge of producing a new A-level by basically producing ‘re-jigged’ versions of the ‘same old same old’—a ‘religious studies’ A-level that is, to all intents and purposes, pretty much a fairly standard ‘theology A-level’ with some additional options. It is impossible, for example, in most syllabuses to just do ‘study of religions’, these must usually be combined with something else (philosophy, ethics, biblical studies etc), and it is impossible in all boards to study two different Dharmic or Eastern traditions. It is also worth pointing out that these new A-levels are coming on stream in the same academic year as we are making changes to GCSEs and the KS3 curriculum—presumably this is a result of the famous ‘joined up thinking’ that we hear so much about.

So I think that these days the purpose of RE A-level is much more complex. It is certainly not part of a smooth linear progression, and the pressure of preparing students for higher education is only one of a number of significant pressures. Some of the key ones are outlined below (and I’m not even going to mention SACRE, OFSTED or the ‘Social inclusion agenda’).

## Exam boards

Under the direction of the QCA, exam boards have a huge effect upon the delivery of A level RE, not just in terms of *what* we cover, but inevitably the *way* that we cover it—with a knock on effect of influencing the skills that we have to emphasise, and thus the preparation that students have. Currently the QCA have decreed that there will be no coursework component at A level in RE, which means that consequently no A-level teacher needs to teach students how to do extended writing—and with exam timings which mean that students have

between 30-45 minutes to do most of their essays. Clearly the key skill our students need is to write those short essays under a strict time limit. We have to spend a lot of time on this because it is actually a difficult skill—consider the title ‘(i) Examine the main teachings and practices of two types of yoga. (ii) Comment on the significance of these contributions to Hinduism’. I wouldn’t want to be assessed on that in 30 minutes! Many students find these limitations frustrating—they are at an age when the depth of their knowledge and understanding is such that they want to be able to write more, and express difficult ideas clearly. When asked about their synoptic paper (90 mins for one essay), my year 13s unanimously described it as ‘fun’.

Coursework is sorely missed—writing at length enabled students to really fly, and enabled A-level teachers to prepare them for the experience of writing ‘proper essays’ at university. My experience, both of preparing and marking coursework, suggests that the much hyped issue of plagiarism is not the key issue. Out of about 4,000 or so courseworks that I marked, very few contained plagiarism, but a lot were over-prepared or over-supported by staff—it was more common to get a block of sixteen courseworks from one centre, all on the same topic, all using the same subheadings, same quotes, and a great deal of the same information. This tends to bring everything to the middle, apparently helping those who are struggling, but certainly limiting those who could fly. Other courseworks—from surveys of Wahabi theology to a comparison between a Wiccan Esbat and Tantric Chakra Puja—have been simply superb, as students’ own interests have driven them to research and write up some really fascinating ideas.

In my opinion the fact that students can do something of interest to them, that they must learn how to do different kinds of research (some of mine even did fieldwork), and they must learn how to plan and write at length, means that the gains that coursework has to offer—to the students, to staff, and to universities—should far outweigh the perceived difficulties, and thus just saying ‘no coursework’ seems a draconian over-reaction. We need to address the problem, to solve it, not pretend that the skills gap doesn’t exist by removing the problem altogether, and pretending that everything is just fine.

The question that springs to mind here is ‘why are some teacher over preparing their candidates?’ and the simple answer is that they are

under pressure from their SLT (which is the current acronym for senior management in schools—Senior Leadership Team), who want you to justify your existence in line with accepted measures (league tables)—your students have to get the good grades, or you won't have a course to run. They also have considerable say over the allocation of resources and timetabling. The growth in A-level courses also puts a great deal of pressure on time-tablers. In my own college we have lost 1 period every two week cycle in year 12, which increases the difficulty of covering the material in sufficient depth in the time. It would also be true to say that the attitude of an SLT to a particular subject is also very important. Subjects that aren't perceived as 'sexy' by an SLT can be lost from the curriculum very easily. Now the SLT are on your back because of...

*Parents*, who want their sons and daughters to do well. Not because they are middle class, precious and pushy (though there are a few of those about), but out of legitimate and very deep concern. They care about league tables, they talk to one another, and are very frequently biased against certain subjects 'Why do you want to do RE—you don't want to become a nun do you?' is a refrain that every RE teacher will be familiar with from parents' evenings at almost any age. For some reason RE carries a particularly heavy bag of negative associations.

The next key pressure that I would like to examine is the *students* themselves, and there are several key points here. Firstly, as we know, there has been an enormous increase in the numbers taking AS and A2, and the fact that this does not automatically translate into increased uptake at university has much to do with the fact that students may be taking this course as a course in itself, with no intention of further study in the subject. It is important that we provide an experience which is valuable for them, which will obviously not focus upon preparation for further additional study—it has to stand on its own. Secondly there is an oft repeated refrain amongst many of the cynical corner of every staffroom (and I daresay in the SCR of any university) that 'things ain't what they used to be'. Let us consider the fact that schools are becoming increasingly good at helping students achieve at GCSE—more are getting higher grades, and wanting to stay onto A-level—which of course means more are coming along to university, in line with the policy of widening access. More students inevitably

means a greater spread of ability and experience, and this may be at the heart of the perception of a spoonfeeding / critical thinking dichotomy. Many teaching staff look back to a time when all A-level students (and first year undergraduates) were just fantastic, highly skilled, keenly focused academics. In all honesty there are some pretty thick rose-tinted spectacles being worn here. A-level has always been a challenge to teach!

Thirdly, we need to remember that students are also from a wider range of backgrounds with a wider range of interests. An additional significant point is that, where RE in schools is good, all their previous experience of the subject will have been non-confessional, i.e. it will not expect them to share a faith position, but the historical forces that have shaped A-level RE means that this is not the case here; ‘Philosophy of Religion’ (lets face it, probably one of the most common options) is really ‘Western, Christian Philosophy of Religion’. (Or as Ralph Norman suggested, ‘The study of John Hick’.) You can really only get worked up about Hick’s replica theory if the idea of resurrection has some meaning for you. (As for Biblical Studies and Church History, the fact that these are not balanced elsewhere by in-depth scriptural studies from other traditions tells us a lot). Finally, when considering students—I teach in a comprehensive, and take that attitude onto A-level—I will take anyone who is prepared to give it 100%, and have been prouder of some of my E grades than some of the As and Bs! I’ve sent students off enthusiastically to study religious studies at university whom others predicted would never get their five GCSEs—and while they might not be the intellectual paragons of myth, they have done amazingly well to achieve! In transition between institutions, we should be meeting students where they are—in many cases with a great deal to offer, and with a lot of hard work behind them, and we should be celebrating their achievements!

The situation in which RE A-level finds itself now is thus a very different one—not a simple part of an on-going process—and if students ever really were those intellectual paragons, the changes in the broader sixth form system mean that they aren’t now, and they won’t be. But they are very often individual thinkers, who are prepared to actively engage with the ideas. So I think that we have to deal with that, we have to be creative and adapt, and learn from each other because all the complaining in the world isn’t going to change it. I’ll be exploring

some of the changes that we have made in more detail later on.

Some of the expectations of higher education were made very clear by speakers at the conference. It is clear that they want enquiring and able young people, with the study skills that they need to do well, but there are other issues of expectation to be considered here too—in particular the expectations that it might be reasonable for teachers to have of higher education institutions. Much more needs to be done to help teachers advise students as to the courses that they might want to do: it would be very useful to have easy access to some important information, such as more detailed explanations of the courses offered, and some information about the teaching time and assessments. But this information is very hard to get; it isn't discussed on department websites, and isn't there is prospectuses either. As Natasha Pyne's paper pointed out at the conference, unimaginative, out of date or inaccurate departmental websites do little for the public image of a department (particularly when aimed at a generation where ICT usage comes naturally). Imagine that you have children at this academic level. Would the two pages in your prospectus or on the website really help them to make a good decision about the course or institution? A good decision doesn't mean that they necessarily come to your university—many of those who leave courses do so because they have picked the wrong place, and we could reduce this by helping students to make the right decisions at the start. We also need to think hard about the relationships that we have across this divide. Academics need to ask themselves, 'How many A-level teachers have I had direct contact with in the last year?' (And of course, the same is true for A-level teachers). This business of guiding students to make the best decisions is very hard, even if you are plugged into academia. Every year I chat with my PhD supervisors about where to send people who are particularly interested in, say, Eastern religions or Continental philosophy, and every year all they are able to tell me is 'So and so at such and such is good at that', which is all very well, but we all know that the big names, the people who have written the big books are probably not going to be teaching first year undergraduates!

The final pressure that we need to consider is that of *teacher expertise*. This falls, I think, into two categories; firstly, the fact that no teacher was ever taught 'how to teach A level'—you pick this up on the hoof, usually basing it on your own experiences of learning at this level

and university (which frequently means lecturing). There is an element of self-fulfilling prophecy here too—it is only human nature to use the methods that are most familiar to you. You will associate them with your own success, and assume that success from others will automatically follow; hence there is a tendency to limit the breadth of individuals who can easily access this teaching. These teaching styles may be really successful for a certain type of learner, and totally opaque for another. Maybe the same is true for university teachers too—I suspect it may be. Secondly, lots of people teaching RE do not have any post A-level experience of the subject. (According to the National Foundation for Educational Research, the NFER, that is 53% of all RE teachers). You only have to look at on line fora—the Times Educational Supplement for example, to be confronted by the pleas of people who are way out of their depths teaching at A-level. Which means that where A-level teaching is not confident, it will inevitably rely on lectures (or commercially produced PowerPoints that the teachers themselves may not understand). This in turn is built upon the status of the subject that I mentioned earlier—recent applicants at my school for a job that specified teaching A-level Philosophy include missionaries with no teaching qualification and archaeologists. However, with the recent, highly publicised, appointment of Tony Blair at Yale it seems that not even universities are immune to the idea that a lack of relevant qualifications are no bar to teaching RE.

So those are some of the pressures and I'm sure that we're all familiar with them—which raises the question of how we move on from here. How do we adapt and survive? I would like to offer some ideas, and please remember, as I'm just a grunt in the trenches, these are just things that I've piloted in my department, which I would like to offer as food for thought—certainly for those of you who teach at A-level, and they may have some implications for university teaching too.

The obvious place to start is 'learning and teaching' (note the 'right on' way I've expressed this—'Learning then Teaching', because, fundamentally, learning comes first!) At my school we have been thinking very hard about this for quite a long time. We're a high achieving institution, rated 'Outstanding in every category' by OFSTED, which has left us with the conundrum of how we continue to develop. We've had a lot of input as a staff on new ideas about learning, with INSET from Alistair Smith and Guy Claxton, and while the theoretical

ideas that these speakers gave us were fantastic, we never really gained practical strategies. About three years ago, a colleague and I visited the ‘Learning Brain Europe’ conference, and encountered the work of the American educationalist Spencer Kagan. We were really excited by Kagan’s methodology of ‘Cooperative Learning’<sup>1</sup> and have been working with this in school ever since—not just within our own departments, but spreading this is as good practice throughout the school. The Kagan approach to cooperative learning is one that, while based upon sound, well-thought out principles, is ideal for the classroom teacher, as there are a large number of content-free structures that enable information to be processed in various ways by students (simultaneously working on other features of the hidden curriculum—emotional intelligence, social skills, etc.) The key ideas of these structures are that students benefit from working with each other, that they are accountable for taking part, that everyone takes part equally, and that all this goes on at the same time. Anyone who has taught at any level will be familiar with what Kagan calls the ‘hogs and logs’ who crop up in the classroom and seminar room where group work is happening—the hog is the one with all the opinions and enthusiasm, the log is the one who will sit there and let the hog get on with it (in both cases for a variety of reasons). Using Kagan structures enables teachers to empower students by getting rid of the hogs and logs in their class, and ensuring that everyone takes part.

There is quite a lot of specious reference to neuroscience in education at the moment (the recent ‘discrediting’ of brain-gym being an example), but there are many ways in which the Kagan approach enables students to learn in a ‘brain-friendly’ way, that is, in the way that their brains are naturally inclined to learn, rather than enforcing something from outside. We use them across all age ranges, and I’ve been amazed that they work so well with sixth formers, but we do have two advantages here: 1) some aspects of the structures are so uncool that they are cool, and 2) you can take a meta-learning approach and explain to sixth formers why these techniques will help them learn.

At this point in the conference presentation, in order to give participants at the conference the experience, we reviewed some of the

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<sup>1</sup> Key text is Kagan, S., ‘Cooperative Learning’, (Kagan Publishing: San Clemente, 1994). Also see <http://www.kaganonline.com/>.

points made above about the pressures on A-level RE, using a Kagan structure called ‘Timed Pair Share’. (The following description, while accurate, does not really get across the experience) Having paired the participants up, pairs were asked to identify who would be Person A and Person B (Person A being the person whose birthday was nearest). Person A was asked to speak for thirty seconds on some of those issues, while Person B listened. At the end of the time, Person B would then have to praise person A for their participation, paraphrase what they had said, and add one thing that was missed. Roles were then reversed, and at the end of the structure, participants were given a ‘farewell gambit’—asked to shake hands and say ‘Thanks, I really enjoyed working with you’. Now, we need to think about why this is a good way to work. To begin with this structure embodies all of Kagan’s principles—*everyone* takes part (compare that to your last seminar experience) for a set amount of time, in a structured way—but there are many other features as well.

It is important to note as well that this technique enables students to take part safely, in the sense that by only working with one other person students will feel less exposed. When teaching in a whole class it is easy to forget that speaking in public is a great fear (indeed, according to a recent poll in America, the greatest—even more so than death). Brain science suggests that a reason for this lies in the amygdala, the body’s threat sensor, that triggers the fight or flight reflex (with the resulting hormonal release that causes increased respiration and heartbeat, as well as a lowering of cognitive function). One of the main things that trigger this process is the experience of being surrounded by faces, particularly unfamiliar ones. If we expect students to be able to overcome this perfectly natural process, and speak confidently to large groups, then this kind of technique is vital method of desensitizing, which can have a huge effect in increasing confidence.

This technique also helps with learning—in Stahl’s model of the mind<sup>2</sup> there is a ‘place’ called the ‘working memory’, where we can hold and manipulate a very limited number of ideas. Information from here is either rejected, or placed in long term memory (for our purposes as teachers—‘learned’). By revisiting material using this kind of struc-

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<sup>2</sup> Sousa, D., *How the Brain Learns*, (Corwin Press: Thousand Oaks California, 2001) p 38.

ture students are given the opportunity to process the ideas that they have been taught, which in turn will increase the likelihood of them learning and understanding. Common sense and our own bitter experience tell us that the best way to learn something is to repeat it over and over again. These structures enable us to do this in a comparatively painless way.

Without this opportunity to process, students will find it comparatively difficult to learn, and it may also militate against further learning. We all have the experience of arriving at work on a Monday morning, all stressed as we have a thousand things to do. Our tactic for dealing with this is to write a list, which makes us less stressed (because we have emptied our working memory—not because we have actually done anything about those things!)

On the most basic level, getting the students to stand up and move around, and interact will also just increase energy in a tired group; which in and of itself can be very important.

Research done in the US in the sixties suggested that social interaction would radically improve retention<sup>3</sup> and learning. This drove the vogue for ‘group work’ that was such a part of Western education in the seventies, but actually (mainly due to Hogs and Logs), this was not that successful. Using Kagan Structures enables us to help students drive up into the kinds of experiences that really promote extremely effective learning. This was recently recognized in our last OFSTED report, where the inspectors commented; ‘The emphasis upon these methods encourages collaborative and co-operative working so even the youngest students are articulate and self-assured, and take responsibility for their learning’<sup>4</sup>. This is particularly valuable for the A-level teacher who has a great deal of material to cover in a short amount of time, but it is not without its difficulties. Some teachers will fear the democratization of the class room that follows this kind of practice—a noisy, busy classroom might be acceptable for year 7s, but is it appropriate for year 13? (Well, I obviously think it is—if there is good

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 95.

<sup>4</sup> OFSTED inspection report 13/2/08:

[http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/portal/site/Internet/menuitem.7c7b38b14d870c7bb1890a01637046a0/?event=getReport&urn=113521&inspectionNumber=311304&providerCategoryID=8192&fileName=\school\\113\\s5rti\\_113521\\_20080306.xml](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/portal/site/Internet/menuitem.7c7b38b14d870c7bb1890a01637046a0/?event=getReport&urn=113521&inspectionNumber=311304&providerCategoryID=8192&fileName=\school\\113\\s5rti_113521_20080306.xml)

learning going on!)

The next significant point to consider is the all important one of study skills. Everyone knows that they're really important, and I know that most sixth form providers are excellent at helping students with this—but this seems odd, as most universities are really good at it too! If we're doing such a good job, why does it need to be repeated? There is, I think, a very simple answer to this question—because they are taught in a generic way, there is a lack of embedding. What I mean here is that study skills are taught in ‘Study Skills’ sessions, which are generic—so that they can be used to support study in different areas. Experience suggests that study skills need to be taught embedded into what we're doing. An example of a practice that we used to support sixth formers who are learning to write essays illustrates this principle of embedding. We will begin by working together on one bit of the essay; say the introduction. We will start with a brainstorming exercise (Kagan's ‘Centrepiece’ is ideal!) to establish the kind of ideas that we might expect to see; in this case, the context that an examiner might want, as well as any key ideas that might be needed to overview the topic. Having done this, students will then have a limited amount of time (about five minutes) to write their own introduction. Then we will critique one another's papers. Each student passes their paper to the left, and receives a new one. On this they will have to write one suggestion to improve it and one thing that they think is poor, (and additionally, although this is not written, think about any ideas, and this could be well-polished turns of phrase, that they might want to pinch for their own writing). By the time that their paper returns, they will have seen at least three others, and have three sets of critiques—which will then set them up for doing a good job. They are then sent home to write their own ‘good introduction’. Over a period of about two weeks, we work on ‘bits’ of the essay (which again models an expectation that an essay is something that takes time and revisiting—rather than something dashed off for a deadline). When the final work is submitted and marked, students put their finished product up on the Moodle VLE<sup>5</sup>, and there is an expectation that they will look at, mark, and critique another five essays. These notes are then referred to as an initial step when the next essay is set. This enables more able students to really

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<sup>5</sup> Free VLE system, available at <http://moodle.org/>.

polish their work, less able students to see what a good example looks like, and everyone to improve through working together. As we move through the year some of the scaffolding is removed (certainly before writing), although the expectation of reviewing and critiquing others work remains consistent. We expect teachers to improve by sharing good practice, and my experience suggests that this helps students as well!

The same is true for research skills—we expect students to be able to gather information from various resources, and use it to justify their arguments, but how often do we give them the tools to do this? The Internet means that they are in an almost info-toxic environment. There is so much information, and they will often read things that are so clearly written that they can feel ‘how can I put it better?’ So they don’t, they just pinch it.

I would suggest that a good approach is to work together to take notes from various sources, and then put them into a personal structure: adding the additional step of modelling extracting information will help them to break their bizarre addiction to Wikipedia. A useful tool here is *Inspiration*<sup>6</sup>—this software enables diagrams to be generated quickly and easily; students can be using this confidently within ten minutes—by modelling the extraction of the information that we need, then putting it into a different structure, and then using it to write, we model the addition of that extra step, and help to enable proper research. Of course this use of diagrams also helps support visual learners—and the great advantage is if you prefer a more traditional set of notes, they are only a click away.

Getting students to develop the skill of independent reading is a real toughie—and I have to confess that I haven’t cracked it—although setting reading using photocopied text and expecting highlighting and notes is a good step in the right direction.

ICT offers a lot to RE, especially through videos; if we can’t take students to see the evening aarti at Varanasi, we can at least find them a video of it on the Internet. The fact that most school ICT blocks YouTube is nothing short of a scandal—the potential for using video in

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<sup>6</sup> Download a free trial at <http://www.inspiration.com/>, a UK based blog. For examples of the way we have used this tool, see:

<http://taglearning.com/blog/inspired/2008/03/03/inspiration-in-religious-education/#more-31>.

the classroom in a really positive way is enormously increased when you have instant access to such a wide range of short clips, which can be used on the hoof if necessary. There are ways round this of course—using independent sites to produce Flash movies of a video that can be downloaded & put into PowerPoints for example (although YouTube is in the process of upgrading to mp4 which will enable direct downloading).

ICT also offers us the potential to network widely—not yet officially exploited terribly well at A level (the exam boards for example have not yet caught onto the idea of ‘official’ online discussion boards), though my students (most of whom live in villages, remote from one another) do use MSN to communicate when they are working.

I’m beginning to develop online resources for students in Second Life<sup>7</sup>—this is an online virtual world that is rapidly becoming attractive both to business and education as a new frontier that is worthy of development. Many universities are already developing materials for this, but you can make your own—I’ve designed and built the Devandrashika Hindu Temple<sup>8</sup>, an online, virtual temple. Clicking on features of the temple enables links to over 150 videos & webcams, notecards for artefacts and figures, opportunities to discuss with devotees, and to cooperate on essays out of class. For example, if your avatar stands next to the Linga in front of the Shiva Shrine, and you click on it, you will receive a note card about ‘What a Linga is’, as well as a link to YouTube video of linga puja, and the Vishwanath temple webcam. I have encountered my A-level students (or at least, their avatars) here in discussion with an American Vedanta teacher & German Iskcon devotee. This is still an experiment though—and I’ve yet to really integrate it effectively into the schemes of work, although I’m optimistic that it offers a great deal more than the usual VLE (which at the end of the day, is really only a sophisticated electronic way of saying ‘Here’s a worksheet’).

To return to the starting point; I’m trying to suggest that to work effectively with the students that we are getting, we need to start thinking in a different way—spoonfeeding (or scaffolding as I would prefer to call it) is not a bad thing, but the starting point that will enable

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<sup>7</sup> <http://secondlife.com/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://slurl.com/secondlife/Anglia/91/30/21>

us to build up to individual critical thinking. We all need training wheels and support to begin with—to help us to reach the stage where we can crank our Ducati right over on a hard corner.

Some of the ideas that I've talked about may seem wacky, or certainly pushing the boundaries of what you might like to do in a classroom / lecture theatre / seminar room, but as Einstein said: 'Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, while expecting different results', so if we know that we are not satisfied with the situation as things are now, we need to do something about it! In a way, to return to my original analogy, we need to screw our courage to the sticking post, and be prepared to go over the top into unexplored territory if we are going to push forward.

Where do we go from here? I believe that establishing dialogue is the key. This conference is a good start, but we all need to make more effort to network effectively—start genuine conversations between university and school departments so we can help students make the right decisions, work together to influence policy, ensure continuity of experience and content—let us try to avoid forcing all students to repeat material that they may have covered at A-level, and share good practice about teaching and learning. We need to think about creating opportunities for genuine learning conversations—and sharing our experiences more broadly and more often, inviting academics into schools, and teachers into universities!

# **Staff Expectations and Student Experience:**

## **A Case Study of First Year Undergraduate Curriculum Planning and Evaluation**

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The authors would like to thank those students who participated in the focus group for their contributions, which were invaluable in preparing this paper.

**B**ath Spa University describes itself as ‘a teaching-led university with an emphasis on teaching of the highest quality’.<sup>1</sup> Its origins can be traced back to the mid-nineteenth century when the art school was founded, with teacher training dating from the late nineteenth century in respect of domestic science.<sup>2</sup> It was in 1945 that the Newton Park estate, between Bath and Keynsham, was leased from

the Duchy of Cornwall to serve as the site for a teacher training college delivering a wider variety of subjects.<sup>3</sup> In 1975 the Bath Teacher Training College and what was then known as the Bath College of Domestic Science merged to create Bath College of Higher Education and in 1983 the Bath Academy of Art joined this merged institution.<sup>4</sup> In 1989 Bath College of Higher Education became independent of local authority control.<sup>5</sup> In 1992, it acquired taught degree awarding powers while, in 1997, it became Bath Spa University College and, in 2005, it attained University status.<sup>6</sup>

Study of Religions (previously Religious Studies) has a comparatively long history at Bath Spa University where (since at least the 1970s) it was taught for the first two years of a combined programme leading to a Bachelor of Education degree. In 1990, for instance, provision encompassed a general introduction to the subject, including a range of religious traditions and approaches to their study in year one and, in year two, a placement in a religious community combined with further study of Buddhism and some philosophy of religions including Marxist, Christian and Hindu perspectives as well as an independent project. In the early 1990s Study of Religions developed into a three-year subject in the Combined Award and subsequently, in the mid 1990s, into a Single Honours subject with increased staffing and variety of provision. Typically, cohorts contain students with different backgrounds in the subject, both in terms of a faith commitment (if any) and previous study at A-level (where applicable).

Thus, in addition to the fact that Bath Spa University is not a religious foundation and has no denominational affiliations, Study of Religions has a heritage of offering a broad curriculum, recruiting students with diverse prior educational experience and including a multi-faith perspective on the philosophy of religions. This heritage continues to inform the culture and ethos of the Department as it seeks

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<sup>1</sup> Bath Spa University (BSU), *About Us: Introduction*,  
<http://www.bathspa.ac.uk/about/> accessed 15/07/08.

<sup>2</sup> Bath Spa University, *Celebrating our History and Looking to Our Future* (Bath: Bath Spa University, 2005) 32pp, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p.5.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

to enhance and renew its provision in the light of changing needs and expectations.

Insofar as the first year of any undergraduate programme is concerned, any enhancement and renewal of provision must take account of the daunting nature of this experience. It is by no means unusual for students to feel rather overwhelmed by the personal and academic challenges of the transition to university. A focus group spoke of various challenges associated with moving away from home, the ‘hurry up and wait’ experience of Freshers’ Week with its combination of information overload and minimal subject input, the amount of self-directed time instead of a fully timetabled day and the requirement to move beyond reliance on a textbook as source material. Interestingly, given the theme of ‘Spoonfeeding versus Critical Thinking’, in the course of discussion it was volunteered that school was about spoonfeeding whereas university was supposed to be about independent learning, a contentious claim certainly but one that does point to a perception of a significant change between A-level and the first year of a degree.

In order to locate the most recent developments in teaching and learning in their appropriate context, it is necessary to set out what immediately preceded them. The Department offered one undergraduate programme, Study of Religions, that in the first year consisted of four introductory modules: two alternate compulsory modules covering the so-called ‘Big Six’ (Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism in one, Judaism, Christianity and Islam in the other) and integrating some theory and method as well as study skills; and two optional modules addressing contemporary spiritualities, that is New Age, Paganism, New Religious Movements and current trends in older religions, and contemporary issues, such as science, ecology and gender, respectively. However, a number of factors came together to prompt a series of changes. In brief, these factors included:

1. A recognition that the compulsory modules were overloaded and that it was necessary to disaggregate the content in order to do justice to theory and method but also the religions;
2. An increasing incidence of plagiarism despite warnings and advice, apparently committed without awareness of wrongdoing;

3. A growing interest in philosophy and ethics evident at ‘A’ level in Religious Studies and among our own students, reflected in changes seen in other Higher Education Institutions.

Hence the following decisions were made:

1. Write a new compulsory module to concentrate upon theory and method and free up the religion modules while also responding to university initiatives including key skills and employability;
2. Re-focus on study skills throughout the first year programme and trial different strategies;
3. Introduce Philosophy and Ethics as a separate subject including ‘Eastern’ as well as ‘Western’ thought, though not defined in terms of philosophy of religions.

We will discuss each of these decisions in turn.

## **The New Compulsory Module**

The creation of this core first year module was very much directed towards introducing methodological issues in study of religions and embedding employability and key skills in a more focused manner than had been previously attempted. Indeed, departmentally, we were particularly concerned with exploring ways by which the development of skills could be integrated more effectively with the assessment and teaching methods utilised in our year one modules. This was a move that was in sympathy with what Biggs had characterised as a constructive alignment approach to curriculum design.<sup>7</sup> It also, potentially at

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<sup>7</sup> See Biggs, J., *Teaching for Quality Learning at University* 2nd ed. (Maidenhead: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 11-33 and Biggs, J., *Aligning Teaching and Assessment to Curriculum Objectives*:

[http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/resources/resource-database/id154\\_aligning\\_teaching\\_and\\_assessment.rtf](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/resources/resource-database/id154_aligning_teaching_and_assessment.rtf) (originally published September 2003) accessed 08/09/08.

least, seemed to be an approach that was able to address certain transitional problems between ‘A’ level and University. As such, some commentary and explanation of constructive alignment and our efforts at applying it is required.

Biggs defines constructive alignment as an integrated system wherein ‘all aspects of teaching and assessment are tuned to support high level learning’.<sup>8</sup> More expansively, he explains that:

The “constructive” aspect refers to what the learner does, which is to construct meaning through relevant learning exercises. The “alignment” aspect refers to what the teacher does, which is to set up a learning environment that supports the learning activities appropriate to achieving the desired learning outcomes.<sup>9</sup>

These points seem eminently reasonable, indeed don’t we all aspire to them? However, it needs to be considered, explored and specified how students can most effectively acquire the range of key and subject skills outlined in the learning outcomes. Arguably there are far more diverse and effective learning events, exercises and tasks than simply lectures, essays and unseen examinations available.

Biggs is more explicit about the content of constructive alignment when he asserts that:

The key is that the components in the teaching system, especially the teaching methods used and the assessment tasks, are aligned to the learning activities assumed in the intended outcomes. The learner is in a sense ‘trapped’, and finds it difficult to escape without learning what is intended should be learned.<sup>10</sup>

This, essentially, became the aim of the new compulsory first year module. Moving away from the relatively standard Study of Religions’ level one model of two pieces of written coursework (essays) and a pass/fail seminar presentation, the new module aimed to have students

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<sup>8</sup> Biggs, J., *Aligning Teaching and Assessment to Curriculum Objectives*, [http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/resources/resource-database/id154\\_aligning\\_teaching\\_and\\_assessment.rtf](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/resources/resource-database/id154_aligning_teaching_and_assessment.rtf) (originally published September 2003) accessed 08/09/08, p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

demonstrate, or rather perform, their understanding of the core modules' learning outcomes through some more diverse, experimental and, arguably, appropriately aligned assessment tasks.

Biggs had noted that '[p]roblem-based learning is a very good example of aligned teaching';<sup>11</sup> moreover, context-based learning is frequently lauded as one of the most effective means of developing employability and key skills in HE. With this in mind, the new compulsory module introduced a group project based on a hypothetical research problem. In groups, ideally of five, students were set the problem of making a research bid. This was comprised of a rationale for the composition of a 'fictive' research team and a research strategy that would best solve the outlined problem and deliver valuable results. The group rationale and strategy was then presented to a committee, composed of staff and fellow students in the final four to five weeks of the module, and was subjected to cross-examination and questioning. The delivery of a good group performance inevitably required that the students had effectively synthesised the diverse methodological issues and concepts they encountered in the module, in addition to demonstrating competence with a range of employability and key skills, including group-working and verbal, written and ICT presentation skills.

The module assessment was further based upon the submission of a seminar portfolio. This incorporated reflective commentaries on the group presentation and a selection of the module's seminars, and also an introductory 1,500 word essay. The assessment weighting was apportioned at 50% for the essay, 25% for the project and 25% for the portfolio. However, since acquiring a greater understanding of the principles of constructive alignment, there is a strong argument for placing far greater weight on the group project than is currently allocated. As Ramsden asserts, 'the assessment *is* the curriculum, as far as the students are concerned. They'll learn what they think they'll be assessed on, not what's in the curriculum, or what's been "covered" in class'.<sup>12</sup> The new compulsory module constitutes a concerted effort on our part to make sure that the assessment tasks mirror what we intend the students to learn.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

Evaluatively, I do not wish to suggest that Study of Religions at Bath Spa has been inattentive to these aspects of curriculum design in the past. The level two compulsory methodology module, Studying Religions, for example, has featured a week long placement with a religious community for each 2nd year student for over the past 35 years. This placement requires that each student (1) engage in ethnographic field research—effectively, in Biggs’ terminology, ‘performing their knowledge’—and (2) produce a reflective journal. In this case there is a clearly a good degree of constructive alignment already taking place in the Study of Religions curriculum. However, there is arguably a need to exhibit far greater confidence when formulating assessment items that make sure that the students ‘cannot escape learning what is intended should be learned’, even when, paradoxically, this is independence of learning.

Somewhat awkwardly, student assessments of the new module and the project have been rather mixed to date. This may be a consequence of the nature of the hypothetical problem outlined. Set in the future, with a science fiction theme, the research problem is arguably too detached from a ‘real world’ context and requires an imaginative leap that some students have been unwilling or found difficult to make. Furthermore, there are a range of administrative and practical problems that seem to arise whenever more varied methods of assessment are introduced into a module. These largely structural problems mean that there is a greater capacity for, and also a greater occurrence of, non-submissions of assignments by students (e.g. students typically need to have completed more pieces of work and have attended more lectures and seminars than those modules which only require written assignments or exams). Additional layers of assessment complexity may be precisely what some first year students do not need, despite the fact that those selfsame assessment methods are being used to facilitate the academic transition between A-level and HE. Clearly there are ambiguities to be addressed here.

The success of the module may be best measured by the degree to which students are meeting the module learning outcomes and also acquiring the employability skills that we are seeking to embed and constructively align. More longitudinal data is required to assess this, though, and student module evaluations are not necessarily the best resource to consult in this regard. What may be required is far greater

vigilance with regard to the implementation and collection of assignments during the first year, spoon-feeding if you will, while the assignments themselves can be effectively aligned to promote such learning outcomes as critical thinking.

## **Re-focusing on Study Skills**

The new compulsory module provides an opportunity for study skills to be delivered to all Study of Religions students, supplementing generic guidance provided by the University through the Student Study Skills Centre and the Library and Information Services webpages and written subject guidance in the *Study of Religions Undergraduate Handbook and Learning Guide*. Study Skills have become a particular priority due to the incidence of plagiarism. Plagiarism is taken seriously by the University with a subcommittee that can impose a range of penalties appropriate to the severity of the offence taking into account its extent as well as the student's motivation, record and response. However, this is an issue across the sector with news reports indicating a rise in plagiarism or, more positively, its detection.<sup>13</sup> That plagiarism is of general concern is reflected in specialised media, notably the Times Higher Education Supplement which runs items on this subject on a regular basis. Recently, for example, there have been articles on cultural differences in views about the nature of knowledge and the ownership of ideas,<sup>14</sup> a survey for the Higher Education Academy and Joint Information Systems Committee pointing to the significance of the sort of institution in respect of the prevalence of plagiarism and the procedures put in place to deal with it,<sup>15</sup> and, in a more light-hearted

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<sup>13</sup> See for example, Hooper, Dickon, 'Students Turn to Web Plagiarism', <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/england/7370922.stm> (originally published 29/04/08) accessed 09/07/08.

<sup>14</sup> Gill, John, 'Cultural Insight can Tackle Plagiarism', <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storyCode=4015647&sectionCode=26> (originally published 24/04/08) accessed 16/07/08.

<sup>15</sup> Attwood, Rachel, '143 Students Expelled for Plagiarism', <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storyCode=4023517&sectionCode=26> (originally published 12/06/08) accessed 16/07/08.

vein, on a lecturer's difficulty in coping with the burdens of marking, particularly plagiarism.<sup>16</sup> The fact that plagiarism is a national problem does not, of course, abrogate the 'local' responsibility to understand and combat plagiarism.

Discussions with our own students reveal that what staff regard as 'Unfair Practice' is, in a number of instances, a continuation of what they have been accustomed to doing at A-level. While some students are used to providing bibliographies and at least to attributing quotations to authors, many explain that this is entirely new and some struggle to make the necessary adjustment at the start of their studies. Indeed, referencing has been mentioned by students as one of the most marked differences between A-level and undergraduate study. Although members of staff do take a generous view in encouraging the full acknowledgement of sources of ideas and information and ensuring that this acknowledgement is presented in an approved format, some work that has been submitted is totally unsatisfactory. An over-dependence on the model answers prepared by teachers for wholly legitimate reasons may lead students to believe that reproducing a lecture as coursework is legitimate despite not constituting an independently written response to the question set. Certainly, a cut and paste approach to essays mainly from Internet sites, surely not encouraged by or acceptable to teachers, can not satisfy the criterion of independence and thus gives little evidence of the knowledge or understanding foundational to analysis and criticism. Moreover, there is evidence that plagiarism is a concern for teachers as witnessed by a poll conducted among members of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers in respect of students aged sixteen to eighteen years where over half of respondents indicated that plagiarism was an issue in their students' work.<sup>17</sup>

It should go without saying that members of university staff want to do whatever they can to avoid students committing plagiarism since

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<sup>16</sup> Monday, Gloria, 'Missing the Mark for Originality', [http://www.timeshigh-  
ereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storyCode=4018447&sectionCode=26](http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storyCode=4018447&sectionCode=26) (originally published 16/07/08) accessed 16/07/08.

<sup>17</sup> Precey, Matt, 'Study Shows "Plagiarism Epidemic"',  
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/fr/-/1/hi/england/7194850.stm> (originally published 17/01/08) accessed 09/07/08.

they are interested in students forming their own academic judgments based on the evaluation of evidence. There is also a pastoral concern about students being subject to the stress associated with an accusation of plagiarism, possibly leading to a breakdown in relations with staff, when, in the great majority of cases, the problem seems to be inexperience and incomprehension rather than the deliberate intention to deceive. At the same time, it is clearly vital to safeguard the value of the award for all students by maintaining the integrity and rigour of the assessment process, especially when assessment is carried out mainly through coursework. In striking the right balance between scholarly standards and student support, the instilling of good practice and the creation of a new ethos are far preferable to proving and then punishing plagiarism.

There are any number of books on study skills that undergraduate students may consult to gain an understanding of the academic project, some of which have a subject-specific character such as Scott Brown's *A Guide to Writing Academic Essays in Religious Studies* that includes a section on how not to plagiarise alongside a valuable introduction to the discipline and its demands.<sup>18</sup> A book with a wider remit, integrating study skills with a series of chapters on religion and religions and different approaches, is Dominic Corrywright and Peggy Morgan's *Get Set for Religious Studies* written to ease the transition between school/college and university.<sup>19</sup> This book has already been recommended to our students but, irrespective of its usefulness, it remains necessary to devote class time to the issue of plagiarism as an important part of study skills that, overall, should explain to students exactly what is required, principally their own thoughts though this entails adequate acknowledgement of others' ideas and information, and thus empower them to succeed.

In the compulsory module, Beyond Belief, two sessions on Study Skills are scheduled. The former centres on the library and research, examining books, journals and information sources relevant to the subject and offering guidance on reading, note taking and time man-

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<sup>18</sup> Brown, S.G., *A Guide to Writing Academic Essays in Religious Studies* (London & New York: Continuum, 2008), xii+107pp, pp. 26-27.

<sup>19</sup> Corrywright, D. & Morgan, P., *Get Set for Religious Studies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), vi+196pp.

agement. The latter centres on essay writing, including advice on structure, style, presentation and referencing but attaching a special emphasis to discussing plagiarism in terms of what it is and how it is to be avoided. The advantages of these dedicated sessions are obvious. They allow for concentrated coverage of key areas and, as stated above, they can be accessed by all students registered for Study of Religions.

However, some students taking the subject in the modular scheme do so as an elective and may not take the compulsory module meaning that optional modules also need to include Study Skills. This became apparent during the first occurrence of the compulsory module when the optional modules did not foreground Study Skills and problems occurred, particularly among students for whom Study of Religions was an elective. Moreover, the optional modules allow for the employment of other, complementary, strategies. For example, in the module on Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism (called Gurus, Buddhas and Swamis) that runs alongside the compulsory module, a series of short (five to ten minute) sessions have been built into weekly seminars, based on short handouts (no more than one sheet of A4 and generally no more than one side) on specific themes distributed in lectures and also uploaded to the module's Virtual Learning Environment site. The selection and order of these themes relate to the type and timing of assignments and, in addition to providing simplified instructions on when and how to reference, try to approach referencing from first principles. This leads us to begin with the nature and role of an academic essay that we define as being 'to advance an argument, based upon reasoned reflection of a wide range of evidence'. Students are advised that an essay should enable a tutor 'to assess how far you understand the question and the issues raised, the extent to which you have developed and expressed your own informed interpretation of these issues and the way in which you have engaged with a wide range of sources'. These and other points have been discussed with students and form the basis for later themes such as reading (making clear the number of sources we expect to be used in an essay and how they are to be selected) and note taking (stating that notes should be made in the students' own words or else clearly indicated as quotations).

Indeed, referencing is not mentioned explicitly until after some guidance on planning an essay that includes looking at structure and content and stressing both analysis and evidence. Only then do we get

into the technicalities of referencing when we work the most common examples (book, chapter in edited book, journal article and online source) in both systems accepted by the university. Our experience has been that students do find this difficult and take some time to get to grips with the format of referencing but we prioritise the frequency and appropriateness of referencing. Of course, Study Skills cannot be reduced to referencing and, as has already become evident, we do address other issues. For instance, in critiquing a draft, we suggest a number of questions that students should ask of their work as they read through it. These questions concern whether the draft answers the question, covers all its aspects, explains points clearly, cites evidence, avoids factual error, draws upon recommended reading, advances an argument and does so in coherent stages. Students are also directed to the generic marking criteria for the subject and the learning outcomes for the module and assignment; in other words, they have access to the way in which their work will be assessed and an opportunity to use this information to improve what they submit. Referencing is an integral part of this and so, however important it is, cannot be treated in isolation.

Perhaps, then, it is worth noting that a topic we deal with later in the module, writing academically, treats referencing as one of the characteristics of such writing along with a formal style, an argument grounded in evidence, the recognition of criticisms and limitations and consideration of the context and implications of an issue. It is hoped that this holistic approach enables students to understand why referencing is vital as it underwrites many of the other characteristics of academic writing—the evidence cited, the existence of other perspectives and the relationship with other work on the same or related topics.

So far, judging by student responses, this strategy seems to be accepted, albeit less than enthusiastically since admittedly study skills is not the most exciting topic, as a complement to that provided in the compulsory module. While it would be premature to hail this as a success and the value of this strategy will need to be monitored, in semester 1 this year (2007-8), there seemed to be fewer cases of plagiarism and perhaps this was due in part to the stress on Study Skills.

Semester 2 optional modules also include Study Skills. For instance, Introduction to Contemporary Spiritualities incorporates a bespoke seminar session after the first essay has been marked to pick

up on common errors. Students are offered a choice of activities. This year these were: revision on referencing by rewriting incorrect examples, including bibliographies; marking a deliberately inadequate, the anti-model, essay using the published marking criteria; and completing the Druid apostrophe exercise that involves applying punctuation rules set out on a worksheet. Or again, the remaining optional module, Children of Abraham, includes generic feedback in a lecture where similarly common errors (including referencing, though also structure, punctuation and grammar) are addressed and additional advice is offered. In both cases, referencing continues to be an area of concern both for members of staff and for students.

Even so, instances of plagiarism continued to come to light. The reason for this is not clear. It may be that Study Skills need to be accorded greater priority in semester 2 modules but it may also be that students did not benefit from the Study Skills sessions and materials available to them whether due to non-attendance or misplaced confidence. Certainly, we regard attendance as a major factor in our effectiveness in promoting good practice. Overall, we conclude that we should take every opportunity at the beginning of the first year to concentrate on orienting students to the demands of university study in such a way that they realise in what respects and, crucially, why they may need to change how they go about doing their work.

## **Philosophy and Ethics**

In 2006 a new subject pathway in Philosophy and Ethics was introduced at Bath Spa in response to both the increasing popularity of Philosophy at A-level and based on research nationally and with existing and prospective students. Between 2003 and 2005 there had been a dramatic increase in the number of A-level candidates taking Philosophy (42% AQA) and the increases in entries at AS level taking Critical Thinking had been nothing short of exponential. Furthermore there was an emerging demand amongst employers for students with such skills as ‘ethical literacy’ and ‘value literacy’, and the teaching of the newly introduced subject of Citizenship in schools could clearly benefit from teachers with a background in Philosophy and Ethics.

Usefully, two of the Study of Religions teaching staff in at Bath

Spa are philosophers by training and a third is an international expert on Buddhism and the ethics of war. There was an opportunity to launch a new subject pathway and also provide a unique route for many students into the subject. But what is it that is distinctive about Philosophy and Ethics at Bath Spa, and how precisely does this relate to progression in Religious Studies between A-level and first year university?

Currently, Philosophy and Ethics at Bath Spa University operates as a Major, Joint or Minor subject pathway that will be entering its first level three year of teaching in the coming academic year (2008-9). In terms of the curriculum, it is important to note that Philosophy and Ethics at Bath Spa is not attempting to compete directly with established analytic philosophy departments in the UK. We are: (1) concerned to address student interests in the subject that are fostered within the A-level context; (2) we do not assume any specific knowledge of philosophy or ethics upon entry; and (3) we are committed to developing a capacity amongst our students for philosophical and ethical enquiry in a global context, encompassing a range of non-Western approaches and perspectives. Towards this end, in year one we have two modules that serve as introductions to questions and topics in Epistemology, Metaphysics and Ethics. These have proved to be popular elective options amongst students and are accessible thematic gateways into the subject. They encourage anyone with an interest in philosophy or ethics to get involved in the debates and do not advantage those who have taken philosophy at 'A' level with regard to content. Student evaluations suggest that the breadth of content and thematic approach is welcomed, particularly amongst those who have done 'A' level philosophy.

In the interests of encouraging students to develop core philosophical skills, such as an ability to argue effectively and responsively, a significant component of the first year module's assessment is based upon presentations. These require students to develop and defend responses to philosophical questions in a formal seminar setting. While essays are retained throughout the Philosophy and Ethics programme, the use of more diverse assessment tasks encourages the development of the kind of critical, dialectical and self-reflective attributes that philosophy degrees are understood to foster and which are also valued by employers in the marketplace. The aim is that our

students will be able to demonstrate and perform their philosophy in different and challenging contexts. They must be able to apply their analytical and argumentative skills creatively and flexibly, and certainly not simply in written form. The use of assessment methods such as discussion fora and individual student presentations have also been implemented in current year two Philosophy and Ethics modules, such as Indian Visions: Philosophy in Indian Traditions, and these are complemented by applied projects and timed critical analyses in year three. Again, the principles of constructive alignment are being applied to guarantee that, not simply are learning outcomes and benchmarking statements met, but that the transition between 'A' level and university level is a relatively smooth one.

## Challenges and Opportunities

A trend that has become increasingly evident is the narrowing of subjects studied at A-level where, alongside the rise in popularity of philosophy and ethics, relatively few have studied religions other than Christianity. Figures for students entering Bath Spa University in academic year 2006-7 and taking Study of Religions (including as an elective) reveal that twenty-two of sixty-seven had A-levels in Religious Studies. Of these, fifteen mentioned having studied philosophy of religion and eleven ethics, ten Christianity and one Church history. In addition to one student mentioning the Sociology of Religion, seven mentioned Buddhism, four Islam and one Judaism. Indeed, given how the Department positions itself as providing a broad curriculum with a focus on living religions including alternative spiritualities and perhaps also the particular reputation it has for teaching Buddhism attributable to our Head of Department Denise Cush's A-level textbook on Buddhism,<sup>20</sup> it may even be that our intake is more varied than some. Without excluding the possibility that some students choose Bath Spa to broaden their education, when dealing with so much that is new it is understandable that students may decide to stick with what they know or, if venturing further afield, to prefer the really

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<sup>20</sup> Cush, D., *Buddhism, A Student's Approach to World Religions Series*. (Sevenoaks: Hodder & Stoughton, 1994), 172pp.

new. Thus, however well evaluated the modules on what might be called the major religions, such modules may be at a distinct disadvantage but the Department wants to encourage students to consider taking such modules in order for them to benefit fully from the range of learning opportunities provided at advanced levels. Throughout, notwithstanding some assumptions to the contrary perhaps arising out of overly descriptive treatments of religions, we believe that to study religions empathetically and experientially does not entail the absence of critical thinking.

In the future, we aim to continue to develop Philosophy and Ethics along the distinctive lines that we have laid out for ourselves. Namely, we are approaching philosophical and ethical enquiry in a global context, rather, that is, than through a purely Western, Greek and analytic framework. Towards this end, we are likely to introduce Chinese philosophy, for which there is considerable student demand, along with a range of other non-Western modes of reasoning and argument. However, clearly there are staffing issues to be considered in this regard. More specifically, though, we aim to provide assessment items and learning opportunities that will encourage students to develop critical thinking skills and an ability to argue effectively and persuasively. This emphasis on skills is, we note, is something that is still somewhat lacking in many other philosophy degrees nationally. We are also likely to continue to focus on applied and contemporary philosophical and ethical issues, which are convergent with both staff research interests and student demand, while also maintaining a close engagement with existentialist topics such as the meaning of life.

Although Philosophy and Ethics has emerged from within Bath Spa's Study of Religions department, there is, we should emphasise, actually remarkably little Philosophy of Religion(s) taught in the subject pathway. The emphasis is rather on the diversity of philosophical and ethical thought globally, the promotion of philosophical attributes, skills and virtues and sustained reflection on applied and existential philosophical problems. While there are certain affinities with the Study of Religions as a subject, the Philosophy and Ethics programme is complementary to, rather than coextensive with, its departmental counterpart. Study of Religions for its part remains committed to the study of living religions with a contemporary focus, whether in terms of theories, issues or trends. It looks towards enhancing its existing

international links, maintaining its inclusive curriculum while developing its distinctive interests in non-Western and alternative traditions and building upon its expertise in religion and education, both academic and professional.

However, one of the most significant issues for the future is the revalidation of the modular scheme that will mean each subject has to produce a compulsory 40 credit double module at each level. In addition, modules will be offered on a year-long rather than semesterised basis. This change in teaching pattern has obvious consequences for Study Skills as well as for the balance of compulsory and optional elements in Study of Religions and (at least in the second and third years) Philosophy and Ethics. Looking forward, we are committed to underpinning teaching and learning with a clear pedagogic rationale that is responsive to students' needs and interests in terms of providing introductions to the discipline(s), including study skills and offering a diverse curriculum. This must involve consideration of our students' prior knowledge and experience as we strive to develop their critical thinking skills. These are skills that both subjects value, albeit inflected differently, whether at A-level or at University.



# Critical Thinking and Conceptual Enquiry:

## A Report on the Pilot of the International Baccalaureate World Religions Course

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### Critical Thinking and the International Baccalaureate Curriculum

The main characteristics of the IB Diploma are that there is a requirement to study six subjects from different discipline areas, three at higher level and three at standard level. The central core also requires students to complete a course in Theory of Knowledge, an

Discourse: Learning and Teaching in Philosophical and Religious Studies,

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Extended Essay on a topic of their choice and a programme of CAS which involves community service and activities.<sup>1</sup>

World religions is becoming an increasingly important and popular area of study. The significance of religious beliefs as a driving force in social and political developments is being recognized in all countries and communities. Increasingly young people are showing an interest in a sophisticated understanding of religious beliefs and practice. Disappointingly, media coverage of religious affairs often distorts and simplifies belief systems, but courses such as IB world religions can act as a counter point to this, allowing students to study religions in a complex and satisfying way.

The decision to develop the IB world religions course as a pilot therefore was based on three factors. First, a solid cohort of schools already studied world religions as a school based syllabus and were keen to continue with a course in this discipline; secondly, the belief that as an area of study it is highly appropriate for students studying in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; thirdly, it accords well with the aims and objectives of the IB Diploma.

The appropriateness of a study of world religions in the International Baccalaureate Diploma is illustrated in a number of ways. The Mission Statement states that the organisation believes in fostering ‘intercultural understanding and respect’<sup>2</sup>. The learner profile, which describes the student that the programmes are aiming to produce, speaks of them being ‘open-minded and principled’<sup>3</sup>. In addition, the aim of Group 3 subjects to encourage ‘the systematic and critical study of human experience and behaviour’<sup>4</sup> very much accords with a study of world religions.

In 2005, a small curriculum review committee composed of experts in different world religions was assembled to develop the new course, and they proposed a radical re-think of the previous syllabus which had existed as a school-based syllabus. If a subject is mainstream and established, the curriculum review will tend to be more

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the structure of the Diploma Programme see:  
<http://www.ibo.org>.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.ibo.org/mission/24 July 2008>.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.ibo.org/programmes/learner profile/24 July 2008>.

<sup>4</sup> *World Religions Pilot Guide*, (IBO, 2007) p.6.

cautious and piecemeal. In this case the six schools belonging to the pilot were receptive to change and the committee saw they had an opportunity to develop an exciting and challenging course which included a strong methodology. Helen's job was to ensure that it complied with the standards and philosophy of subjects in Group 3 of the Diploma programme. Much of the inspiration for the course structure and methodology came from Clive.

The IB world religions course aims to encourage students to think critically about religions whilst approaching their study through an awareness of other people's beliefs. This can best be summed up as a kind of hard-edged empathy in which the student is encouraged to put themselves in the shoes of the believer, not in a lazy, sentimental way but rather through an appreciation of the conceptual heart of the religious experience of the believer.

The International Baccalaureate world religions course consists of three parts: Part 1: introduction to world religions; Part 2: in-depth studies and Part 3: internal assessment. It provides a combination of breadth and depth and a range of methods of assessment.

For the introduction to world religions, students must study five world religions from the following chart choosing at least one religion from each column:

Hinduism	Judaism	Taoism
Buddhism	Christianity	Jainism
Sikhism	Islam	Baha'i Faith

Taken from World religions pilot guide 2007, p.11.

This requirement ensures that students are exposed to religious ideas from a wide range of faiths, an appropriate requirement for an international education. The fundamental questions that guide the teacher through this part of the course ensure that the approach is analytical and critical.

Part two of the course represents an opportunity for students to explore two religions in depth each chosen from a separate column, again to ensure breadth of perspective. Each religion is approached

through concepts and themes and the syllabus provides considerable guidance in approaching the subject matter critically.

The third part of the syllabus, the internal assessment, is a critical analysis based on an investigative study in which students are encourage to reflect on their methods of research. This exciting part of the course allows the students to follow their interests and is assessed internally by the teacher and moderated by an external examiner.

The pilot course has been in operation for two years and schools that follow it have just gone through their first examination session. All schools participating in the pilot have the opportunity to feedback on how the syllabus and assessment instruments are working and to participate in training exercises to improve pedagogy. In a recent meeting a day was set aside to visit the United World College of the Atlantic to work with both the world religions classes on improving understanding of the syllabus and on encouraging students to get to the conceptual heart of the programme.

Currently there are six schools following the pilot, four in the United States (one of which is a public or state school) one in the UK and one in Peru. In September 2008 one additional school in India will join and one more in the USA. As two of the participating schools are part of the United World College movement the classes have students from a wide variety of countries and religious backgrounds in them. This presents exciting challenges for teachers and students alike.

Feedback on the pilot course has been very positive both from the teachers and students. Below are some comments from students in participating schools:

**How can you ever hope to understand other cultures if you do not understand the beliefs that motivate them?**

**World religions has enabled me to focus on not only the differences but also the similarities that exist between different religions.**

*(Atlantic College, UK.)*

**IB world religions is a class in which for the first time I felt as if my eyes were truly opened to the world and the diversity that it contains. I believe that it is essential for a true seeker of an international diploma to take this class. Not only does the course**

broaden the mind and open doors into uncharted territory but it also encourages a sense of empathy and understanding for others.

(*James Robinson School, USA.*)

## A Curriculum Pedagogy: Conceptual Enquiry

As mentioned earlier, designing the new world religions curriculum involved the careful consideration of appropriate and effective learning and teaching approaches. Because the curriculum demanded both a study of themes and an enquiry into concepts, the relevance of these to one another would provide both the breadth (themes) and depth of enquiry and critical response (concepts). The themes (which relate to Ninian Smart's dimensions of religion<sup>5</sup>)—ritual, sacred texts, doctrines/ beliefs, religious experience, ethics and moral conduct—provided the areas of knowledge and understanding required from students.<sup>6</sup>

However, to gain insight into and critically assess the nature of the religious worldviews themselves a list of key concepts was compiled that were distinctive to each religion, for example, the concept of resurrection in Christianity, or the concept of *tawhid* in Islam.<sup>7</sup> Whilst the theme of doctrines/beliefs obviously included the key concepts it was much broader. For example, beliefs in forgiveness and salvation appear in a number of religions but do not define the distinctiveness of the religion that separates it from others. The key concepts also operate as a means of understanding the distinctive way a religion interprets human experience, its hermeneutic, and how that becomes manifest within its symbolic activities (ritual, worship, iconography) and informs its ethical judgements. At a more refined level distinctions between groups or denominations, within the same religion, can be analysed at a conceptual level and in a systematic way, to determine how and why their hermeneutical frames of reference vary

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<sup>5</sup> Smart, N. ,*The Religious Experience of Mankind*, (London: Fontana, 1971) pp. 18-21.

<sup>6</sup> *World Religions Pilot Guide*, (IBO, 2007) pp. 16-18.

<sup>7</sup> World Religions Pilot Guide, (IBO, 2007) pp.18, 22, 25, 28, 31, 35.

according to their interpretations of key concepts and their understanding of the inter-relationship between concepts. For example, in Buddhism in relation to the concept of *sunyata* in Mahayana Buddhism and its effect on conceptions of *nirvana*, *sangha* and the *bodhisattva*.

In this way, by putting the horizontal axis of the themes (knowledge and understanding) against the vertical axis of conceptual development a template is formed that provides the basis of the pedagogical strategy, or methodology, required. The priority, for learners and teachers, was conceptual engagement but this was to be achieved through covering the body of knowledge of the curriculum. This reflected the demands of the highest generic grade descriptor requirement (grade 7) of the IB:

- Conceptual awareness
- Insight and knowledge and understanding which are evident in the skills of critical thinking
- The ability to analyse and evaluate evidence
- The ability to synthesise knowledge and concepts

As a result of this approach teachers had to revise their understanding of the requirements involved in a study of world religions. Conceptual enquiry was not simply extending knowledge and understanding, nor was it teaching to extend the same. Rather, it involved setting up learning on the basis of explicit conceptual engagement to enhance the skills of critical thinking: insight gained through analysis, synthesis and evaluation.

The teaching and learning days for the teachers focused on how a concept or concepts could be introduced and then linked to the themes in the curriculum, and the stimuli used, to set up student enquiry. In many ways this reversed the teacher's planning procedures and applied greater rigour to the learning process. A template for this was provided with the conceptual cycle of learning methodology from the Hampshire Agreed Syllabus<sup>8</sup>. However, this is still a work in progress.

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<sup>8</sup> *Living Difference: the Agreed Syllabus for Hampshire, Portsmouth and Southampton, Hampshire, Hampshire, Portsmouth and Southampton Councils*, (Hampshire County Council, 2004) p. 18.

In the first examination in 2008 questions were designed to ensure that candidates had the opportunity to use this conceptual enquiry approach. As a result it was diagnostically possible to identify the strengths and weaknesses of candidates responses according to the conceptual awareness present in their answers. Where there was little, answers were largely descriptive or involved some explanation. Where conceptual awareness was present the answers became richer and more complex involving the higher level critical skills. In effect, using a conceptual enquiry approach effectively moved students on from covering the curriculum to gaining higher levels of religious literacy and focusing on worldview analysis.



# Fostering Effective and Appropriate Use of Online Resources: (Or: How Do We Stop Students Copying their Essays from Wikipedia?)

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## The perceived problem

In certain educational circles today there is a widespread feeling that many students are relying too heavily on sub-standard Web resources for their academic work, and are consequently neglecting conventional print media. With this goes the worry that students are settling for quick or easily obtainable answers rather than thorough and rigorous ones: the use of Wikipedia and other sites of its ilk tends to be viewed as a particular problem. Students who are making the transition

between further and higher education may be seen as especially vulnerable, as the increased expectation that they will work independently brings with it a greater need to locate their own source materials, and hence a corresponding risk that what they elect to use will be unsuitable.

However, these concerns generally seem to have their roots in impressions and anecdotes rather than hard evidence. In an attempt to assess the true extent of the problem and determine what—if any—action might be appropriate, Intute: Arts and Humanities conducted a survey into the use of print and online resources among further and higher education students.

## **Survey details**

The survey was targeted at students of philosophy, theology, and religious studies, and was publicised chiefly via emails sent to schools, sixth form colleges, and universities. It ran from 4<sup>th</sup> to 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2008. The survey took the form of an online questionnaire with twenty-three questions, most of which were multiple choice. Some questions were accompanied by optional free text fields to allow students to give additional information if they chose.

A total of 261 students completed the survey. 58 of these were in further education (studying for A-levels, Highers, or a similar qualification), 131 were undergraduates, and 72 were graduate students. However, this paper focuses chiefly on the answers given by the further education students and the undergraduates, giving an effective sample size of 189. Of this group, 44% were studying philosophy, and 60% religious studies and/or theology.

## **Students' use of print and online resources**

After some opening demographic questions, the first major section of the survey focused on the sorts of resources students use in the course of their academic work. We asked two sets of questions: one about the resources used for a typical essay, and one about those they would

expect to use for researching an unfamiliar area within their discipline —when looking for background information, for example, or as part of an independent project.

We began by inviting students to select from a list all the types of resource they would expect to use in the course of writing a typical essay or assignment. The results were as follows:

	FE Students	Undergraduates
Handouts or other material provided directly by course teacher	90%	75%
Books, articles, or other print resources recommended by course teacher	78%	98%
Other print resources	29%	85%
No print resources	2%	0%

Table 1: Print resources used for a typical essay or assignment

	FE Students	Undergraduates
Google or other search engines	76%	69%
Wikipedia	55%	40%
Online resources recommended by course teacher	62%	79%
Other online resources	31%	69%
No online resources	14%	3%

Table 2: Online resources used for a typical essay or assignment

It seems plain from these figures that students are still making extensive use of print resources. The vast majority of students turn to material either provided or recommended by their teachers, with—as we would perhaps expect—something of a preference for handouts and similar material among further education students, and books, articles, and other print resources among undergraduates. Online resources are certainly also widely used, but have not yet achieved quite the same universality as print materials.

The most striking difference between students in further education and undergraduates lies in the prevalence of use of resources not specifically recommended by their teachers: undergraduates are nearly three times as likely to use print resources located by other means, and more than twice as likely to use online resources in this category. This information alone provides no way of assessing the type or quality of resources used, but it is encouraging to note that a large proportion of university students apparently routinely look beyond the prescribed reading for an assignment.

To determine which sorts of resource students rely on most heavily, we also asked three further questions: which of the listed categories of resources they would usually consult first, which category they would expect to make most use of, and whether they would expect to make more use of print resources or of online ones overall.

The bias towards printed resources was even more pronounced here. A significant majority of students (84%) said they would consult either handouts or recommended books and articles first—once again, further education students were significantly more likely to opt for handouts, and undergraduates for recommended books or articles. A similar proportion (82%) said they would be likely to make most use of one of these two types of resource. If other print resources are also included, that figure rises to 92%.

Almost two thirds (63.5%) would expect to use print resources more, and another 28% would expect to use print and online resources about equally, leaving only 8.5% who would expect to make more use of online resources.

The questions about researching an unfamiliar topic featured a slightly different list of resource types (reflecting the fact that, for example, handouts are unlikely to be available for areas of the subject being studied independently). The results for the first question of this

set, in which students were invited to select all the types of resource they would expect to use, were as follows:

	FE Students	Undergraduates
Books, articles, or other print resources recommended by course teacher	81%	85%
Other print resources	53%	67%
Library catalogue	15%	69%
Google or other search engines	53%	69%
Wikipedia	38%	46%
Online resources recommended by course teacher	45%	57%
Other online resources	24%	43%
None of these	0%	0%

Table 3: Resources used when researching an unfamiliar topic

Most of the percentages here are lower than for the same categories of resources in the earlier questions about a typical assignment, indicating that in general students expect to use fewer types of resource when working on an unfamiliar topic. Print resources remain popular, with recommended books and articles topping the list. Google and other search engines take second place, but with other print resources very close behind. Those who favour traditional methods of gathering information may take some comfort from the fact that, at least among undergraduates, library catalogues remain more popular than Wikipedia.

As in the first set of questions, students were also asked which type of resource they would expect to consult first, and whether they

would expect to use print or online resources more overall. (Students were not asked which specific type of resource they would expect to use most, because of the difficulties in predicting this for an unfamiliar topic.) Print material retained the upper hand, but online resources proved significantly more popular here than in the questions about a typical assignment. 56% of students said they would consult some form of print resource first, while 16% favoured Google, and 12% Wikipedia. Just under half (46%) would expect to make more use of print resources, 27% would expect to use print and online resources about equally, and 23% would expect to make more use of online resources, leaving 4% who were uncertain.

Assuming that respondents were on the whole answering honestly, it appears that the impression that students are neglecting print resources and relying too heavily on online material is something of a myth. Print resources are still the core information source for the vast majority of students, and while it seems that students lean more towards using online resources when researching new topics, print material nevertheless remains important there. Widespread Internet access has undoubtedly increased the variety of information sources available to students, but this is surely no bad thing.

Space was provided for students to give further information about their use of print and online resources if they wished to do so, and while the comments expressed a wide range of opinions, some interesting trends emerged. A number of students said that they liked to use the Internet to get an overview of a subject, then turn to print resources for more detail; some also reported using online sources to identify additional print material which might be useful. Students liked the convenience of the Web: material can be found quickly and easily, and—unlike library books—used by multiple people at the same time. Online journals and encyclopaedias were particularly popular types of resource.

However, students' opinions of online material were not unanimously positive. A significant number expressed concerns about the reliability of Web resources, particularly Wikipedia. Although it is clear that many students do make use of the site, they generally seem well aware of its somewhat dubious reputation: comments typically stressed that while it was useful as a starting point or for gaining information quickly, what it said should always be verified using more academical-

ly rigorous sources. Other students mentioned more practical issues, complaining of slow or unreliable Internet connections, or commenting that they found it more pleasant to read printed texts than online ones.

## **Training and confidence**

The next section asked students about the training they had received in finding suitable resources for academic use, and about how confident they felt in doing so.

Training in general appears to be rather sparse. About two thirds (66%) of students reported that they had received no or only a little training in finding print resources, and this figure goes up to just over three quarters (76%) for online resources. (Surprisingly, further education students reported slightly more training than undergraduates. There are a number of possible explanations for this discrepancy, but it seems probable the subjective nature of the scale used contributed: that is, that the two groups have different views about how much training constitutes a little, a moderate amount, or a lot.)

Nevertheless, despite the lack of formal instruction, students' confidence in their ability to find resources is high: 91% felt reasonably or very able to locate suitable print resources, and 88% for online resources. Undergraduates were a little more confident than further education students, particularly where print resources are concerned.

## **Knowledge of online resources**

The final major section of the questionnaire was intended to assess students' knowledge of major Web resources in their disciplines, and hence test to what extent their confidence in their ability to locate resources was justified.

This was accomplished by presenting students with a list of twenty three key websites, and asking them to select one of four options for each one:

- Never heard of
- Heard of but haven't used

- Use occasionally
- Use regularly

The results were filtered according to subject group: that is, only philosophy students' answers were considered for philosophy sites, and only religious studies/theology students' answers for theological sites.

Despite this, however, the results were somewhat disappointing. Only two sites had near universal recognition and a high level of use for academic purposes, and these were the two sites on the list with perhaps least claim to be academic resources—Google<sup>1</sup> and Wikipedia.<sup>2</sup> 82% reported using the former regularly, and another 15% occasionally. Wikipedia is used regularly by 45%, and occasionally by 44%.

Only three other sites were known to over half the students from the relevant discipline: Bible Gateway<sup>3</sup>, the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy<sup>4</sup>, and the Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy<sup>5</sup>. Roughly one in three (33%) had heard of or used Oxford Scholarship Online<sup>6</sup>. Just over half (58%) of religious studies/theology undergraduates were aware of New Advent / The Catholic Encyclopedia<sup>7</sup>, and a substantial proportion of these used it at least occasionally, but a large majority (88%) of further education students had never heard of the site. Similarly, about a third (34%) of undergraduates at least knew of the Christian Classics Ethereal Library<sup>8</sup>, but under 10% of further education students. The Internet Sacred Text Archive<sup>9</sup>, Adherents.com<sup>10</sup>, Religious Tolerance.org<sup>11</sup>, and the Perseus Digital Library<sup>12</sup> were all known to around 10 to 15% of students.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.google.co.uk/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.biblegateway.com/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://plato.stanford.edu/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.rep.routledge.com/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.oxfordscholarship.com/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.newadvent.org/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.ccel.org/>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.sacred-texts.com/>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.adherents.com/>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.religioustolerance.org/>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/>

Somewhat alarmingly, around three quarters of students had never heard of the major bibliographic databases in their fields—77% for the Philosopher's Index<sup>13</sup>, and 76% for the ATLA Religion Database<sup>14</sup>, although the figure for the latter drops to 64% for undergraduates.

However, perhaps the most striking statistic was the lack of recognition of scholarly gateways. The survey asked about the following: Intute<sup>15</sup>; the Virtual Religion Index<sup>16</sup>; the Wabash Center Internet Guide<sup>17</sup>; the New Testament Gateway<sup>18</sup>; EpistemeLinks<sup>19</sup>; Peter Suber's Guide to Philosophy<sup>20</sup>; Peter King's Philosophy Around the Web<sup>21</sup>; Philosophy at Large<sup>22</sup>; and Noesis<sup>23</sup> (the last of these is a philosophy search engine rather than a gateway proper, but as a specialist tool for locating sites relating to a particular academic area, it seems appropriate to consider it under the same heading).

Typically, name recognition for gateways was under 10%, with only one or two students actually using them. EpistemeLinks and the New Testament Gateway fared somewhat better than the rest, with 19% having at least heard of the former, and 41% of the latter (however, given the comparative popularity of the similarly named Bible Gateway website, it is possible that some students simply confused the two sites).

This section of the survey also included a separate question asking students if they made use of gateway sites in the course of their academic work. Gateways were defined as ‘websites offering lists of links to other sites on a particular topic’, but no examples were given, as part of the purpose of the question was to determine which sites students associated with this term. Just over a quarter (28%) answered

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.philinfo.org/>

<sup>14</sup> [http://www.atla.com/products/catalogs/catalogs\\_rdb.html](http://www.atla.com/products/catalogs/catalogs_rdb.html)

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.intute.ac.uk/>

<sup>16</sup> <http://virtualreligion.net/>

<sup>17</sup> [http://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/resources/guide\\_headings.aspx](http://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/resources/guide_headings.aspx)

<sup>18</sup> <http://ntgateway.com/>

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.epistemelinks.com/>

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.earlham.edu/~peters/philiinks.htm>

<sup>21</sup> [http://users.ox.ac.uk/~worc0337/phil\\_index.html](http://users.ox.ac.uk/~worc0337/phil_index.html)

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.liv.ac.uk/pal/>

<sup>23</sup> <http://noesis.evansville.edu/>

in the affirmative, but when asked to list the ones they used, many students named search engines, bibliographic databases, and other sites not usually classed as gateways: in fact, the concept seems to be one with which students are generally unfamiliar.

## Conclusions

The majority of students have received little training in finding academic resources, but are nevertheless confident of their ability to do so. However, their lack of recognition of key websites suggests this confidence may be misplaced. Anecdotal evidence suggests students are often unaware even of the electronic resources their own institutions offer, but students are unlikely to seek assistance if they don't think they need it: a significant part of the problem is that they are unaware of how much there is that they do not know.

Consequently, there is a significant chance that students are not using the best online resources available to them. Although print material remains the major source of information for many students, online resources are undeniably important, and are likely to become even more so in the future. If students lack awareness of the range of resources available, it is almost inevitable that they will fall back on whatever is easiest to find. For those students who use online resources as a starting point for learning about a new subject, there is a risk that using inappropriate Web resources may also have an impact on their subsequent use of print material. Biased or inaccurate introductions to a topic may mean students move on to the more scholarly literature with a warped view of the subject which may colour their interpretation, and as non-scholarly sources are less likely to point students in the direction of the key academic works in a given area, they may also miss out on important references.

## Steps towards a solution

It seems plain that it is desirable for students to receive more training in finding resources suitable for academic use. Ideally, this training should start as early as possible in a student's educational career. A

2008 report on the UCL ‘Google generation’ study, commissioned by JISC and the British Library, stressed the importance of developing information literacy skills early in life: with regard to students in the US (who have thus far received more attention in this respect than their UK cousins), the report comments that ‘the research finds that intervention at university age is too late: these students have already developed an ingrained coping behaviour: they have learnt to ‘get by’ with Google.’<sup>24</sup> Mirroring the survey results reported above, the report continues: ‘The problem here is that they simply do not recognize that they have a problem: there is a big gap between their actual performance in information literacy tests and their self-estimates of information skill’<sup>25</sup>.

It also seems necessary for training to be an ongoing process. Too many students report being offered only a brief induction session at the beginning of their course, at a time when they are already likely to be suffering from information overload, and consequently do not retain much of what they are told. If there is little or no subsequent input, it is hardly surprising that students find themselves lacking the relevant knowledge. Additionally, the rate at which electronic resources (and the technology used to access them) develop is by itself sufficient to make regular updates indispensable.

However, while adequate training is vital, it can also be—unfortunately—costly and time consuming, and as a result it may not always be a straightforward matter for departments to meet students’ needs in this area. It is therefore important to find efficient methods of guiding students to appropriate material.

The questionnaire answers detailed above suggest that there is a key resource which is currently being largely overlooked: academic gateway sites. These offer hand-picked selections of links to quality websites, and as such, can serve a purpose similar to that of a university library. The books in a university library are selected by experts—usually librarians or members of the university staff—as

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<sup>24</sup> UCL CIBER Group, *Information Behaviour of the Researcher of the Future*, 11 January 2008,

[http://www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents/programmes/reppres/gg\\_final\\_keynote\\_11012008.pdf](http://www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents/programmes/reppres/gg_final_keynote_11012008.pdf), retrieved on 8 September 2008, p. 23.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

works that are useful for academic purposes. Not every book is useful for every purpose, but libraries provide students with a framework for research on any given topic, and in the same way, a good academically orientated gateway will provide students with a solid starting point for Web-based research.

Gateways are frequently neglected because students don't see the need for them: a common reaction is 'Why not just Google it?' However, gateways offer several advantages over search engines. Quality control of the listed sites has already been mentioned; speed and efficiency are also significant factors. A Google search for a popular term will not infrequently produce several million hits. Sifting through all of these is clearly impractical, so results that appear after the first few pages will usually be ignored. But even searching through the top hits may be a laborious process: many may be unscholarly (very probably including an oh-so-tempting Wikipedia article near the top of the list) or simply irrelevant. Searching a gateway for a popular topic, however, typically produces links to a few dozen of the most relevant academic sites, saving the searcher time and effort.

Some gateways offer even more than this. Links may be annotated, to provide further information about what's likely to be useful before you even start clicking. Intute<sup>26</sup>, a free UK-based service with a database of over 120,000 websites suitable for use in further and higher education and research, gives a descriptive review of each site catalogued. The site also has a variety of additional features, including Limelight articles (which draw together collections of links on topics of interest), a conferences and events database, and the Virtual Training Suite<sup>27</sup>—a collection of over sixty interactive online tutorials covering most academic disciplines, providing a tour of key websites in a particular subject area, plus advice on finding and evaluating further resources.

Directing students to gateways is not the whole solution, but it is a fast and efficient way to guide their use of the Internet. The survey suggests that educators are right to have some worries about students' use of online resources, but that it is not the extent of use that they should be chiefly concerned about, but rather the lack of awareness—

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<sup>26</sup> <http://www.intute.ac.uk/>

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.vts.intute.ac.uk/>

and consequent lack of use—of the most appropriate sites. As part of a wider package of measures designed to improve information literacy skills, gateways are one way to tackle this problem.



# Theological Foundations of Action Research for Learning and Teaching

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## Learning through practice

**I**t is a fair assumption, I think, that these days most undergraduate courses in ethics will include discussion of MacIntyre's virtue ethics, and that it is therefore not improbable that at least some students in UK universities have a fair chance of encountering Aristotelian ideas about the importance of the 'cultivation of the virtues',<sup>1</sup> of 'actions according to right reason'<sup>2</sup>—*kata to orthon logon*—and, perhaps, of knowing 'how to exercise judgment in particular cases'<sup>3</sup>—*phronesis*. They may even encounter what MacIntyre describes as Aristotle's dis-

tinction between ‘intellectual virtues’ which are ‘acquired through teaching’, and ‘virtues of character’ which are acquired ‘from habitual exercise’. They may learn that people ‘become just or courageous by performing just or courageous acts’, and that they ‘become theoretically or practically wise as a result of systematic instruction’. It is not impossible that they also come to see that ‘these two kinds of moral education are intimately related’.<sup>4</sup> Whether or not they find any of this brilliant, or even merely deeply interesting, it is nevertheless a not entirely misinformed guess that their tutor may have already encouraged them to read (in translation) something of what Aristotle had written about how moral virtues are acquired through repetition in the Nicomachean Ethics:

The things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them...men become builders by building and lyre-players by playing the lyre; so too we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts'.<sup>5</sup>

And having reflected on all this, the students may end up turning over in their minds the possibility that ethics might, after all, be just a matter of acquiring good habits, the right *ethos*. At this point, the theology or religious studies student might conceivably be interested to discover what MacIntyre has to say about all this in relation to one classical Christian tradition, and puzzle over the ‘Stoic ancestry’<sup>6</sup> of much Christian ethics in distinction to the Aristotelian vision. They might be tempted to try to think through whether it really means that a ‘strict Aristotelian, such as Aquinas’ is, in fact, the ‘highly deviant medieval figure’ that MacIntyre would have him to be.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, they might be encouraged, gently, to think about the

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<sup>1</sup> MacIntyre, A., *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1985) p. 149.

<sup>2</sup> MacIntyre, Ibid., p. 152.

<sup>3</sup> MacIntyre, Ibid., p. 154.

<sup>4</sup> MacIntyre, Ibid., p. 154.

<sup>5</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, II, 1103a33f; trans. David Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980) p. 29.

<sup>6</sup> MacIntyre, Ibid., p. 168.

<sup>7</sup> MacIntyre, Ibid., p. 178.

practice of their own studies, the acquisition of good scholarly habits, the trial-and-error business of reading, thinking, and writing, and thereby become the sort of self-reflective learners that are able to grasp why their lecturers appear to be so keen to get them to write essays and sit exams, and why, when they mark such work, they tend to value independent, critical thought, whatever that may be. If they take this intellectual path, they will find that there have been many before them who have already noticed such potential connections, and have explored the territory with some rigour. No surprises here, perhaps, as some of Aristotle's own thinking about education, and indeed, about the problems of education has been preserved in the *Politics*:

All do not take the same view about what should be learnt by the young, either with a view to plain goodness or with a view to the best life possible; nor is opinion clear whether education should be directed mainly to the understanding or mainly to moral character...whether the proper studies to be followed are those which are useful in life, or those which make for goodness, or those which advance the bounds of goodness'.<sup>8</sup>

If they disregard what he has to say about cold plunges into mountain streams,<sup>9</sup> they may nevertheless be interested in his assertion that 'the first principle of action is leisure', and that the proper use of leisure is the cultivation of the mind, a kind of intellectual enjoyment for its own sake. Education is sought 'not as being useful or necessary, but because it is liberal and noble'.<sup>10</sup> But it presumably always represents a balance between the reception of taught instruction and the practice of habitual exercise.

If one allows this, then one begins to see a model of how means and ends can be brought together in the teaching of theology and religious studies. Such a model is the subject of this paper, which basically views the theology and religious studies curriculum as, amongst other things, a tool for fostering critical thinking *with constant reference to the content of the subject*. In addition, I will suggest that

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<sup>8</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Barker, rev. Stalley, (Oxford: World Classics, 1995), VII, ii, 1-6, 1337a.

<sup>9</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, VII, 17, 3.

<sup>10</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, VIII, 3, 1-13.

Aristotelian ideas about the importance of practice to education can be developed into a suitable learning and teaching strategy, or pedagogical tactic, to help foster critical thinking amongst students. And as this is a paper about practical means, the following discussion draws on aspects of my own practical theology of education, my concrete experiences of lecturing in a university, and reports on the action which has emerged from my reflection on how some things can be done better. In saying this, I believe I am expressing agreement with Rowan Williams' observation that “Learning about learning” is ... equally a learning about doing'.<sup>11</sup>

## Reflective Practice and Action Research

What follows may be conceived as an interim report on the preliminary results of what Schon has called ‘reflective practice’,<sup>12</sup> and what others, following the social psychologist Kurt Lewin,<sup>13</sup> have called ‘action research’. A brief summary of the potential of action research for teaching theology and religious studies has recently been provided by Rebecca O’Loughlin as part of a wider study of pedagogical and discipline-specific research methods, and the following remarks are meant to develop some of the results of her work.<sup>14</sup> Broadly, action research represents the application of the insights championed by a long-standing movement of educational theory which first emerged in the UK ‘in opposition to the development of a curriculum technology which stressed the prespecification of measurable learning outcomes’.<sup>15</sup> As John Elliott says, the ‘fundamental aim of action research is to improve practice rather than to produce knowledge. The

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<sup>11</sup> Williams, R., *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 132.

<sup>12</sup> Schon, D., *The Reflective Practitioner* (London: Temple Smith, 1983); Schon, D., *Educating the Reflective Practitioner* (London: Jossey-Bass, 1987).

<sup>13</sup> Kemmis, S., *The Action Research Planner* (Geelong, Victoria: Deakin University, 1981).

<sup>14</sup> O’Loughlin, R., ‘The Relationship Between Pedagogical and Discipline-specific Research Methods: Critical Perspectives’ in *Discourse: Learning and Teaching in Philosophical and Religious Studies*, Vol. 7, no. 2, Spring 2008, pp. 67-120 [p. 69, pp. 110-11].

production and utilization of knowledge is subordinate to, and conditioned by, this fundamental aim'. The key question being asked by a reflective practitioner, or action researcher (at least at it applies to me), is, 'How do I become a better educator of students following a programme of theology or religious studies?' From the student perspective, the key question is, 'How do I become a better student of theology and religious studies?' How often do we explicitly encourage students to discuss this question? Essentially, this is all about improving practice. As such, it is vital to note what Elliott goes on to explain:

The improvement of a practice consists of realizing those values which constitute its ends, e.g. "justice" for legal practice, "patient care" for medicine, "preserving the peace" for policing, "education" for teaching. Such ends are not simply manifested in the outcomes of a practice. They are also manifested as intrinsic qualities of the practices themselves. For example, if the teaching process is to influence the development of students' intellectual powers in relation to curriculum content, then it must manifest such qualities as "openness to their questions, ideas, and ways of thinking", "commitment to free and open discussion", "respect for evidence", "a care to foster independent thinking" and "an interest in the subject matter". Teaching mediates students' access to the curriculum and the quality of this mediating process is not insignificant for the quality of learning.<sup>16</sup>

The thing that should be leapt on here is the relationship Elliott describes between the development of intellectual powers and curriculum content, the fostering of independent thinking and interest in subject matter. Rather than any conceptual divide between transferable skills and subject content, the idea is to view educational practice 'not simply in terms of educational outcomes', but, instead as 'the manifestation within the practice itself of certain qualities which constitute it as an educational process capable of fostering educational outcomes in terms of student learning'.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Elliott, J., *Action Research for Educational Change*, (Milton Keynes : Open University Press, 1991)p. 51; Stenhouse,L., *An Introduction to Curriculum Research and Development* (London: Heinemann, 1975).

<sup>16</sup> Elliott, Ibid., pp. 49-50.

<sup>17</sup> Elliott, Ibid., p. 50.

This, of course, does not—and cannot—mean that ‘transferable skills’ simply replace ‘subject knowledge’ as the content of the very ‘learning outcomes’ of which the action research movement is so critical. For the purposes of the current paper, it needs to be said that I am not arguing for the inclusion of an abstracted, stand-alone, ‘critical thinking’ or ‘transferable skills’ course module within the theology and religious studies curriculum. One cannot practice the piano without a sense of musicality and the musical instrument in front of you. One cannot learn to play theology and religious studies without a sense of criticality and the subject matter in front of you.

Admittedly, ‘action research’ is not beyond criticism. But it can be argued that it is a method which appropriately compliments the discipline of theology in particular. I want to argue that action research can be conceived as a proper response to what Rebecca O’Loughlin has described as ‘theologians’ questions about teaching and learning’.<sup>18</sup> I do not just mean, to take one example, that the model of ‘Participatory Action Research’ inspired by the work of Paulo Freire is intrinsically related to Latin American liberation theology in the 70s,<sup>19</sup> that Freire himself developed his educational praxis with reference to Christian theology and philosophy,<sup>20</sup> or, for that matter, that it is possible to trace

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<sup>18</sup> O’Loughlin, R., ‘The Relationship Between Pedagogical and Discipline-specific Research Methods: Critical Perspectives’ in *Discourse: Learning and Teaching in Philosophical and Religious Studies*, Vol. 7, no. 2, Spring 2008, p. 76.

<sup>19</sup> For an illustration of Freire’s influence on liberation theology, see Gutierrez, G., *A Theology of Liberation* (London: SCM, 1974), pp. 91-92 and pp. 233-35. Freire’s work has been described as ‘one of the most inspiring aspects of the theology of liberation’ in Cumming, ‘Education’, in Rahner, K., ed., *Encyclopedia of Theology: A Concise Sacramentum Mundi* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1975), p. 426

<sup>20</sup> The theological dimensions of Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972) are very significant, but rarely discussed by secular educationalists. Freire himself states that he thinks ‘Christians and Marxists’ are likely to be the most receptive readers of the book (p. 17); the third chapter opens like a theological treatise on the *Logos*, creation, re-creation, love, humility, faith and hope (pp. 60-65); relevant ecclesial documents and conversations with priests are cited (pp. 113-14, 132, 150); Niebuhr and Chenu are quoted (pp. 51, 139-40); references are made to teaching as incarnation and communion (p. 100); a link is drawn between demythologization and liberation (p. 56, cf. p. 74). Most striking, perhaps, is the spiritual tone of Freire’s description of liberation in terms which resonate with the baptismal childbirth imagery of Romans 6:3-9 and 8:18-24:

connections between what liberation theologians describe as ‘base communities’ and the ‘communities of practice’ found in action research (for a European equivalent, see Lange’s *Sprachschule für die Freiheit: Bildung als Problem und Funktion der Kirche*).<sup>21</sup> I do not even mean that attention could also be drawn to the fact that action research is increasingly featuring in programmes of ministerial and practical theology, (something suitably reflected in the literature on practical theology),<sup>22</sup> or even that practical theologians like Swinton and Mowat are now comfortable with the idea that, ‘Practical Theology is fundamentally action research’,<sup>23</sup> for the connection also exists at another level. More than just suggesting that reflection on the teaching of theology and religious studies can itself be conceived as an exercise in practical theology, and that subject pedagogy is something which academic practical theologians should attend to, I also want to say that the Aristotelian basis of action research means that it is possible to acknowledge a fitting compatibility between the sort of pedagogic reflective practice here envisaged and—to take a suitably prominent

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‘Liberation is...a childbirth, and a painful one...born in the labour which brings the new man into the world’ (p. 25). Freire’s more explicit theological writings are also notable: see Freire, P., ‘Education, Liberation and the Church’, in Astley, Francis & Crowder (eds), *Theological Perspectives on Christian Formation: A Reader on Theology and Christian Education* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 169-86; Freire, P., *Pedagogy of the Heart* (London and New York: Continuum, 2007), pp. 101-07.

<sup>21</sup> The connection between the ‘Iglesia Popular de Communidades de Base (Popular Church from the Base)’ and the ‘Movement of Education from the Base’ has been noted in Finger, M., and Asún, J. M., *Adult Education at the Crossroads: Learning Our Way Out* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2001), pp. 82-83. Further, in a European context, Freire’s liberative vision of education has been applied to a German church congregation in a major practical theology study: Lange, E., *Sprachschule für die Freiheit: Bildung als Problem und Funktion der Kirche* (Munich: Kaiser Verlag, 1980).

<sup>22</sup> In terms of relevant literature on practical theology, see Swinton, J. & Mowat, H., *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM 2006); Heitnik, G., *Practical Theology: History, Theory, Action* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans 1999); Conde-Frazier, E., ‘Participatory Action Research: Practical Theology for Social Justice’ in *Religious Education*, 101:3, Summer 2006, pp. 321-29. See also Graham, E., *Transforming Practice* (London: Mowbray, 1996).

<sup>23</sup> Swinton, J. & Mowat, H., *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM 2006) p. 255.

illustrative example—the broader methodological principles of Thomism seen in a wider scope. Would a contemporary Thomist, reflecting on the problems of teaching theology, inevitably end up with a particular bias in favour of action research?<sup>24</sup> Quite possibly. Hugh Walters has noted that, so far as Thomas Aquinas is concerned, the task of education ‘is to ensure the active participation of the learner … stimulated through a questioning approach’. As Walters also notes, ‘all of which sounds very modern’.<sup>25</sup> It is. It is possible to view at least some aspects of Thomist educational philosophy as a prefiguration of Freire, and to see Freire in continuity with aspects of action research in contemporary educational theory. If these continuities are allowed, subject matter, teaching methods, and lecturer and student practitioner reflection can be located within one methodological framework. This is called taking a holistic view, a picture of the integration of form and content in the practice of teaching theology.

But without circling off into a discussion of, say, whether Milbank’s *Theology and Social Theory* can be made relevant to learning and teaching issues (I think it can!), and, in addition, putting to one side for present purposes the ever on-going and endlessly fascinating debate about the distinctiveness of theology and religious studies, at this point, something might appropriately be said about the Aristotelian nature of action research. The following remarks are just to round off what I have been saying about the potential links between Thomism and action research, and are not meant to suggest that teaching and learning has to be done from a Thomist perspective. By no means. But the linkages seem so strong, that a little more comment is called for (especially considering the importance of Thomas Aquinas to so much recent British theology, at least). Such would seem to be required if only to develop a sense of just how and why this approach is fitting.

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<sup>24</sup> It is important to note that Thomism is here simply being used by way of illustration. I have no intention of suggesting that Thomism is the only example that could be discussed here, and definitely do not think that all teachers of theology and religious studies should be beholden to this one particular Christian theological tradition.

<sup>25</sup> Walters, H., Arthur, J., and Gaine, S., *Earthen Vessels: the Thomistic Tradition in Education* (London: Gracewing, 1999), p. 30.

In explanations of action research, reference is often made to Bultmann's one time pupil, Gadamer.<sup>26</sup> But as John Elliott has observed, Gadamer's theory of understanding is deeply indebted to the Aristotelian tradition of practical philosophy:

In developing...his theory of understanding Gadamer draws on the Aristotelian tradition of practical philosophy and fuses it with Heidegger's theory of hermeneutic interpretation. In the Aristotelian tradition of practical philosophy phronesis is a form of reflection concerned with translating universal ethical values into concrete forms of action in a particular situation...values are realized in, rather than as a result of, praxis. Moreover, their meaning can only be grasped as a concrete form of action... Phronesis co-determines the means and ends together by reflecting on the former in the light of the latter and vice versa. The outcome of such reflection – a concrete form of practice – constitutes an achievement of understanding in which both interpretation and application have been integral features of the process.<sup>27</sup>

If such is allowed as a general statement of the capacity of action research to express the principles of Aristotle's ethical theory, then it should be noted that it becomes perfectly possible—if one is so disposed—to give an account of reflective practice on education in Thomist terms. One could view what it means to be a good teacher or a good student in the light of what Thomas has to say about the virtues as learned habits, and what he has to say about the practical intellect and speculative intellect.<sup>28</sup> But such reflection lies outside of the scope of this study.

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<sup>26</sup> On the relationship between Gadamer and Bultmann, see Gadamer, H., *Philosophical Apprenticeships* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985); Jones, G., *Bultmann: Towards a Critical Theology* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), pp. 157-62.

<sup>27</sup> Elliott, J., *Reflecting Where the Action Is*, (New York: Routledge, 2007)p. 107.

<sup>28</sup> An exploration of some of this territory, together with a relevant discussion of MacIntyre and education, is to be found in Walters, H., Arthur, J., and Gaine, S., *Earthen Vessels: the Thomistic Tradition in Education* (London: Gracewing, 1999).

## Praxis and Personal Development

It becomes hard to divorce practical theology from personal development, and the following remarks are intended to address this area of contemporary education theory and policy. Simultaneously, however, I also want to address another issue which arises from the model I am describing, namely, that of the potential prescriptiveness of educational praxis which might arise from the implementation of my model. Let me say at once that this is not conceived as a means of dogmatic programming whereby a student passively receives not only the doctrine but also the thought-process of the teacher.<sup>29</sup> I have argued elsewhere, following the lead of Josef Pieper, that Thomas—to return to the illustrative example I have been exploring—should not be thought of as a dogmatic thinker, but as the sort of questioning, critical thinker for whom theology is a process of wonder, enquiry and discovery.<sup>30</sup> A sense of puzzlement is intrinsic to the task of theology, so long as theology is conceived of as a response to a sense of mystery given as Christian grace. Viewed in the light of mystery, openness, not closure, is the key habit of mind which needs to be learned in theology. This, again, provides a point of contact with some recent writing on reflective practice and educational theory. So John Elliott has drawn attention to Geoffrey Hinchcliffe's distinction between pedagogy and education. To quote Hinchcliffe:

Whereas the former (pedagogy) has specific objectives, the latter (education) is underpinned by the idea that the outcome of education is open (like a good conversation) – (and) must be left, in part,

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<sup>29</sup> These remarks are intended to provide some response to Rebecca O'Loughlin's caveat about action research, namely, 'An approach which requires academics to impose their ideas on a situation with a view to changing it may give rise to concerns about imperialism and colonialism among TRS scholars' (O'Loughlin, 'Pedagogical and Discipline-specific Research Methods', p. 111). With respect to Freire, a case can be made that the dialogical model developed in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* to encourage the students to think of themselves as equal partners with the teachers, and hence emancipate them from intellectual imperialism, is an obvious way to try to overcome the problem.

<sup>30</sup> Norman, R., 'Abelard's Legacy: Why Theology is not Faith Seeking Understanding' in *Australian EJournal of Theology*, 10, Pentecost, 2007.

to the interaction between learners and teacher.<sup>31</sup>

Elliott proceeds to focus on Hinchcliffe's connection between good education and conversation.<sup>32</sup> He draws a link here with what Rowan Williams has to say about the need for 'conversational space' in our educational system: 'A good educational institution would be one in which conversation flourished'.<sup>33</sup> In terms of philosophy of education, much can be said of this. It is reminiscent of Pieper, Oakeshott and Rorty. Take Oakeshott, for instance (so very different in political terms to Freire, and in theological terms to Thomas), for whom, as Fuller says:

Whatever metaphysical ground one might introduce to explain the experience [of poetic impulse and contemplative delight], it is the acknowledgement of the experience itself which can be shared and delineated through a conversation between among those who have enjoyed it, despite disagreements that might arise about where the experience comes from or where it may lead. Conversation of this sort expresses for Oakeshott the central character of human existence – the civility of the agreement to disagree – and thus also the importance for us of the institutions of teaching and learning, the places where conversationality is explicitly given priority.<sup>34</sup>

In sum, a key part of Oakeshott's philosophy of education is this: that the 'philosopher potentially forces the practitioners of an activity to become self-conscious, putting them on the road to becoming self-critical where they may undergo the philosopher's own experience of puzzlement'.<sup>35</sup> Notice the reference to practice here. Richard Rorty provides another example of a philosopher of education stressing the importance of conversation. For Rorty, liberal education means acquiring and ethos of conversational edification (if students dislike the

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<sup>31</sup> Hinchcliffe, G., 'Education or Pedagogy?' in *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 35:1, 2001, p. 31. Cited in Elliott, J., *Reflecting Where the Action Is*, pp. 170-71.

<sup>32</sup> Elliott, J., *Reflecting Where the Action Is*, (New York: Routledge, 2007) p. 172.

<sup>33</sup> Williams, R., *Lost Icons* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), p. 89.

<sup>34</sup> Fuller, T., 'Introduction' to Oakeshott, *The Voice of Liberal Learning* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2001), p. xxix.

<sup>35</sup> Fuller, T., 'Introduction' in Oakeshott, M., *The Voice of Liberal Learning*, p. xxvi.

Thomist vision of liberal education grounded on a particular metaphysics they can therefore develop antimetaphysical alternatives with reference to Rorty).<sup>36</sup> Good, traditional stuff like this recommends a practical recovery of something like the old Oxford tutorial system as a means for fostering good conversation. It also makes possible interpretation of Personal Development Planning in a subject-specific context.

Personal Development Planning can be viewed as an exercise whereby the student takes possession of the transformative capacity of education by providing an account of their own subjective encounter with learning, and the changes it has wrought in them. More than just providing the context for understanding the value of their studies, Personal Development Planning also provides space for reflection on the ethos of learning, and an acknowledgement of type of Aristotelian practical wisdom relevant to education. Consider how well this complements, for instance, Maritain's philosophy of education as expounded in his classic text, *Education at the Crossroads*.<sup>37</sup> Maritain locates education within the sphere of ethics and practical wisdom and views it as a mechanism which allows people to fulfil their own personhood. The shaping of the human being with reference to sound judgement and moral virtues is difficult to separate from notions of spirituality. In theological perspective, Personal Development Planning has the potential to become a form of spiritual exercise.<sup>38</sup> It is also an ideal place for reflection on the performance and practice of learning, the practice of being a student of theology or religious studies.

## Practice and the Performance of Theological Study

Before describing what happens when the curriculum is designed in

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<sup>36</sup> See Arcilla, R. V., *For the Love of Perfection: Richard Rorty and Liberal Education* (London: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>37</sup> Maritain, J., *Education at the Crossroads* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1943).

<sup>38</sup> On the connections between education and spirituality, see Groome, T.H., *Educating for Life* (New York: Crossroad, 2000); Palmer, P.J., *To Know as We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco: Harper Row, 1983).

such a way that attention is given to due dialogical conversationality and the rehearsal and performance of the skills necessary for academic theology, I want to briefly explain how such models of learning and teaching are also conceivable within the context of ecclesial theology. By ecclesial theology, I mean theology located within the community of faith rather than in a liberal arts, university context. Perhaps the dichotomy is a false one, as very often university theologians spend their time analysing the sorts of theology which arise from ecclesial communities. However the relationship of church and university is conceived, it is right to say that ideas of theology and learning and teaching are not restricted just to the sphere of the modern educational institution. A theologian who has nothing to do with universities on a professional level may still find that it is necessary to think through the practice of theology as a form of education, and moreover, see education as an important aspect of the spiritual life. Inasmuch as spirituality is connected with discipleship, following the teachings of the Rabbi Jesus, it is also something which includes a grappling with education. Nicholas Lash has explored the theme of the church as a school in various books. For instance, he writes of the churches as ‘schools of Christian wisdom...richly endowed projects of lifelong education’,<sup>39</sup> as ‘schools of holiness’.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, he conceives of doctrine in educational terms:

Doctrine is an activity. It has its place in the family of activities that go under the general heading of “teaching and learning.” It is an aspect of pedagogy. Christian doctrine, therefore, is an aspect of Christian pedagogy. But pedagogy...is by no means confined to the classroom or the seminar. If Christianity is a school for the production of persons in relation to the unknown God through the discipleship of the crucified, then there is nothing that we do and suffer, think, or feel, or undergo, which may not contribute to schooling. It follows that there is no single activity, or cluster of activities, which alone counts as “Christian teaching”.<sup>41</sup>

Ways of thinking about learning and teaching in the university can

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<sup>39</sup> Lash, N., *Holiness, Speech and Silence* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), p. 5.

<sup>40</sup> Lash, N., *Ibid.*, p. 51

<sup>41</sup> Lash, N., *Easter in Ordinary*, (London : SCM, 1988) pp. 258-59.

therefore also be informed, perhaps unexpectedly, by theologians who base theology in the confession of faith groups and ecclesial communities. Take, for instance, what Stanley Hauerwas has to say about the pedagogy of faithful performance. Hauerwas' understanding of the performance of faith compliments the current discussion because, as Swinton and Mowat imply, it corresponds to various aspects of practical theology understood as action research.<sup>42</sup> In his book *Performing the Faith*, Hauerwas outlines his vision of the rehearsal and performance necessary to Christian identity formation:

Neither performance nor improvisation is an instance of simple, undifferentiated doing. Rather, they are timeful, disciplined, ruled unfoldings of action. As such, they require attention, alertness and concentration, all of which bespeaks the hard labor of patience intrinsic to Christian faith. This kind of attention, of course, is not something that can be mastered or attained once and for all, but requires continual practice, repeated rehearsals, ongoing performance, fresh improvisations.<sup>43</sup>

Hauerwas is speaking of performance in the context of the worshipping community, of course, and not primarily about educational institutions. Nevertheless, his basic understanding of the performative activity of the church is explained with reference to education, and it is clear that he thinks of the church as, in some sense, a school of faith.

Worship...becomes a kind of performance before the performance, a preparation beforehand for whatever witness the church might be called upon to give. Being schooled in the basic rhythms and movements that constitute Christian faith means that the church's witness is more than something spoken, debated, written about, discussed; it is a faith that is enacted, performed, fleshed out.<sup>44</sup>

Hauerwas proceeds to say that 'Being disciplined in obedience is perhaps the key virtue of a good and faithful performer'. He cites Lash's idea that the churches can be seen as 'schools of stillness, of

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<sup>42</sup> Swinton, J. & Mowat, H., *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM 2006) pp. 4-5.

<sup>43</sup> Hauerwas, S., *Performing the Faith* (London: SPCK, 2004), p. 97.

<sup>44</sup> Hauerwas, ibid., p. 98.

attentiveness; of courtesy, respect and reverence; academies of contemplativity'.<sup>45</sup> This draws forth the following remarks from Hauerwas: 'Patient listening and attentiveness are skills that are exercised, honed, and refined in Christian community... Attentive listening cannot be had without its two inseparable companions, obedience and patience'.<sup>46</sup> He draws attention to what Rowan Williams calls 'repentent attention'<sup>47</sup> towards others—the attention that allows for conversational interpersonal transformation—or, in Hauerwas own words, 'reverence toward one another and receptivity to God'.<sup>48</sup>

It is tempting to view this as a spirituality of the ethos of peaceful, polite conversation which complements the conversational ethics implied by Oakeshott's vision of academic culture, or of Freire's notion of transformative dialogue. So much is fleshed out by Lash:

Learning to tell the truth takes time, attentiveness and patience. Good learning calls, no less than teaching does, for courtesy, respect, a kind of reverence: reverence for facts and people, evidence and argument, for climates of speech and patterns of behaviour different from our own. There are, I think, affinities ... between the courtesy, the attentiveness, required for friendship; the passionate disinterestedness without which no good scholarly work is done; and the contemplativity which strains, without credulity, to listen for the voice of God.<sup>49</sup>

Insofar as it might become appropriate for students to explore what they think the spiritual dimensions of their academic study could be, the insights of Hauerwas, Lash and Williams could provide suitable aids to reflection. This is especially appropriate considering that the QAA Benchmark Statement may be interpreted as inviting the possibil-

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<sup>45</sup> Lash, N., 'The Church in the State We're In', *Modern Theology* 13:1 (January 1997), p. 121-37; p. 131.

<sup>46</sup> Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith*, p. 100.

<sup>47</sup> Williams, *Open to Judgement*, p. 200.

<sup>48</sup> Hauerwas, S., *Performing the Faith* (London: SPCK, 2004) p. 100.

<sup>49</sup> Lash, N., *Holiness, Speech and Silence* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 62-63. See also Lash, N., *The Beginning and the End of 'Religion'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 85; Lash, N., *Believing Three Ways in One God*, (London : SCM Press, 2002) pp. 10-11.

ity of such reflection insofar as they invite reflection on personal development.

Whatever the subject, the acquisition of knowledge and understanding is usually transformative at some level, changing a person's perspectives and often their attitudes. The nature of TRS means that studying the subject may have a profound impact on the student's life and outlook. The experience of studying may contribute to a student's personal development, transforming horizons by engaging with cultures and societies other than their own, whether ancient or modern. It may foster lifelong quest for wisdom, respect for one's own integrity and that of others, self-examination in terms of the beliefs and values adopted for one's own life, and not least, the challenging of prejudices. The multidisciplinary nature of much TRS also means that students have breadth of vision and intellectual flexibility.<sup>50</sup>

Indeed, such material, together with further reflection on the practice of studying theology and religious studies, would not be out of place in a theology student's PDP. The point is that theology and religious studies provide a special opportunity to integrate personal development planning into the learning outcomes of the curriculum. Moreover, it is even possible to do theological reflection on what personal development portfolios are appropriate assessment tools for academic, moral and spiritual reflection.

## **Application to Curriculum Design**

So far I have tried to make transparent the intellectual principles which have arisen from my experience of theological teaching practice in a university setting, and which have been set to work on curriculum design with the goal of delivering an enhancement of the quality of the learning and teaching experience coherent with the subject matter of theology and religious studies. It makes clear some of the thinking behind how I have tried to deliver better theological teaching with regard

inform principle.<sup>51</sup> Through this, importantly, I have clarified the very practices and principles that help me decide what should be done (as such, I am not just telling you about my practice, but how I decide to change my practice). So how have I applied this to programme development at Canterbury Christ Church University?

For one thing, I have created space in the curriculum to discuss the above with students, that is, involve them in the conversation about the curriculum and their studies. Just as important, however, are the accompanying learning and teaching strategy, and, as might be expected, the accompanying Personal Development Planning system. But let me go on to explain this in greater detail in the following sections which reflect the content of the Revalidation Document of 2007.

## New Pedagogical Strategy

For the 2007 Revalidation of the Theology and Religious Studies programme at Canterbury Christ Church University, the curriculum was changed to include an increased emphasis on issues of student progression and the facilitation of graduate skills. The academic year 2007-08 therefore saw the introduction of a pedagogical strategy to address the educational needs of students. As for the previous revalidation of 2002, study skills and transferable skills continued to be reflected in all modules. This time, however, the department identified the need to make direct reference to the subject content and rationale of theology and religious studies in the process of training all students in study skills, acclimatising them to the academic context of their studies, and facilitating academic literacy. At the planning stage it was intended that this change would help facilitate widening participation by, for instance, adapting to and meeting the educational needs of students from traditionally under-represented groups, including those who may not have successfully undertaken forms of assessment in their earlier education that prepares them for assessment in the higher education

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<sup>51</sup> See Elliott's discussion of Oakeshott on the priority of rational action over rational principle in Elliott, J., *Reflecting Where the Action Is*, (New York: Routledge, 2007) p. 172.p. 100-01.

context. Graduate skills were therefore included in all modules and are systematically encouraged, identified and monitored.

It was decided that it was desirable to encourage students, as they engage with each component of their programme of study, to integrate these skills into their academic work and think about their relevance to their everyday lives. In addition, therefore, it was crucial to seek ways to support the student experience by the enhanced integration of graduate skills into progressive modules in which selected graduate skills become a more pronounced element of module aims, learning outcomes, learning and teaching strategies, and assessment. The essential idea was to get students to rehearse academic writing about theology and religious studies on a weekly basis—to practice the performance of theology, if you like—submit such work for peer review and discussion, and thereby gain the skills and subject knowledge they need whilst being involved in a conversation about the curriculum and the value of their studies. The most straightforward way of doing this is represented by the core modules which are essentially about marrying subject content with graduate skills and are assessed by PDP. I will therefore close this paper (which, admittedly, is only a preliminary, interim report) with the module outlines themselves, and report on the experience of running these modules at another stage of the action research project.

**Module Title:** Studying Problems in the Philosophy of Religion

**Module Code:** MREMD1PPR

**Level:** HE1

**Credit Rating:** 20 Credits

**Duration:** 200 hours of student learning time

**Teaching Hours:** 40 hours

**Academic Responsibility:** Ralph Norman

### **Module Aims:**

The aim of this module is to develop graduate skills through the study of key themes in the Philosophy of Religion. It will act as a bridging unit for first year undergraduates who may have studied aspects of philosophy at AS and A level. It also aims to enable students to gain a basic knowledge of the major philosophical problem studied.

### **Intended Learning Outcomes:**

By the end of this module students should be able to demonstrate:

- 1) A sound knowledge and understanding of selected philosophical problems;
- 2) That they can use established techniques to search, retrieve and manage information, and present the results of their work in a written form using appropriate academic conventions;
- 3) An understanding of how their studies contribute to personal development;<sup>52</sup>
- 4) That they can benchmark and reflect on their own progress with reference to feedback from tutors and peers.<sup>53</sup>

### **Indicative Module Content:**

Students will be introduced to selected significant problems in the Philosophy of Religion. Students will engage with these arguments through studying selections from primary texts in translation. These may include texts from the following illustrative list: Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Anselm's *Proslogion*, Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*, Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. The course will introduce the student to the history of scholarship on each. The key themes of each text will be discussed and subjected to academic criticism.

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<sup>52</sup> QAA, *Benchmark Statement for Theology and Religious Studies*, (2000) 1.5.

<sup>53</sup> See Graduate Skills checklist for Level 1.

Through this study, students will develop their ability to gather and select material from libraries and electronic sources. They will develop their ability to think independently, critically and creatively in an academic context. They will develop their ability to communicate their ideas in a manner appropriate to the university context.

### **Learning and Teaching Strategies:**

The course will involve a series of seminars which will focus on the experience of studying selected philosophical problems at Level 1. Seminars will facilitate the development of selected graduate skills relevant to this level (for example, finding and evaluating sources, thinking academically, and presenting work), and also introduce students to key resources (for example, induction to VLE). This will be supported by lectures that will introduce key themes, texts and ideas. Seminars will be based on discussion of students' written work (formative assessment for sections of portfolio). Study skills issues may be supplemented by material from the Student Study Support Unit.

The teaching and learning strategies will be chosen to underpin the graduate skills associated with this module. Feedback on graduate skills not assessed formally will be given in tutorials and seminars.

### **Assessment:**

1 x 5000 word portfolio: 100% [Learning outcomes 1), 2), 3) & 4)]

The portfolio will provide structured evidence of students' progression in relation to learning outcomes and graduate skills. It will involve a degree of formative assessment, as students are required to submit sections of work (seminar papers which observe academic conventions) for review by peers and their tutor in seminars.<sup>54</sup> Such formative work, together with students' reflection on feedback, and reflections on relevant personal development, will form the basis for work submitted for summative assessment.

It is anticipated that appropriate sections of work for this portfolio may be used to support and enhance students' completion of PDPs.

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<sup>54</sup> CCCU, *Assessment Handbook: Enhancing Practice*, (2005) 2.9.

## **Indicative Assessment Tasks:**

### *Formative work:*

Individually, write a 1000 word summary of Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*, 1.2.3. In small groups, peer review each others' work, and produce a portfolio record of the review process (this may include the use of small group forums in a VLE). As a group, select one piece of work for review by the tutor, along with a short note explaining the reasons for its selection. Individually, write a short reflective log on feedback from the tutor.

### *Summative work:*

Select the best short pieces you have produced for this module, up to a total of 4,000 words. Write a 1,000 word reflective piece that refers to these pieces and the process of formative work entitled, 'What makes a good philosophy of religion essay?' Assemble your work into a portfolio, including relevant selections from the formative process as appendices.

## **Illustrative Bibliography:**

- Clack B. & Clack, B. (1998) *The Philosophy of Religion: A Critical Introduction*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Davies, B. (1993) *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press.
- Davies, B. ed. (1998) *Philosophy of Religion: A Guide to the Subject*. London: Cassell.
- Hick, J. (1983) *Philosophy of Religion*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.
- Hick, J. (1989) *An Interpretation of Religion*. London: Macmillan.
- Kant , I. (1929) *Critique of Pure Reason*. London: Macmillan.
- Marius, R. and Page, M.E. (2005) *A Short Guide to Writing about History*. New York: Pearson.
- McCabe, H. (1987) *God Matters*. London & New York: Mowbray.
- Pattison, G. (2001) *A Short Course in the Philosophy of Religion*. London: SCM Press.
- Swinburne, R. (1996) *Is there a God?* Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

**Module Title:** Philosophy of Academic Culture and Religion

**Module Code:** MREMD2PCR

**Level:** Level Two

**Credit Rating:** 20 Credits

**Duration:** 200 hours of student learning time, 40 hours taught time

**Academic Responsibility:** Ralph Norman

**Module Aims:**

Building on the Level 1 module, ‘Studying Problems in the Philosophy of Religion’, this module aims to acclimatize students to the academic context of Theology and Religious Studies through an articulation of the purposes of the discipline in the university.<sup>55</sup>

**Intended Learning Outcomes:**

By the end of the course students should be able to demonstrate:

- 1) Critical knowledge of selected key theories of the academic context of Theology and Religious Studies;
- 2) An informed evaluation of the worth of their own university studies in Theology and Religious Studies;
- 3) An understanding of the transformative potential of studying Theology and Religious Studies, including the disciplines’ contribution to personal development;<sup>56</sup>
- 4) That they can monitor and enhance their own progress as students with reference to feedback from tutors and peers.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> CCCU, *Policy on Graduate Skills*, (2006) 9b.

<sup>56</sup> QAA , *Benchmark Statement for Theology and Religious Studies*, (2000)1.5

<sup>57</sup> See Graduate Skills checklist for Level 2.

### **Indicative Module Content:**

Students will evaluate the importance of their studies and the significance of critical approaches. Questions considered may include: Why is asking a critical question important? What is the value of an education in the liberal arts? Should education be for its own sake? What are the implications of university studies to other aspects of life (cultural, political and spiritual)? Study of these questions may be supported by engagement with texts on academic culture and religion from the following illustrative list: Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Aquinas' *Commentary on Metaphysics*, Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*, Eliot's *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, Heaney's *The Redress of Poetry*, Newman's *The Idea of a University*, Pieper's *Leisure the Basis of Culture*, Eagleton's *After Theory*.

### **Learning and Teaching Strategies:**

The course will involve a series of seminars which will focus on the academic context of Theology and Religious Studies, and facilitate the development of selected graduate skills relevant to this level. This will be supported by lectures that will introduce key themes, texts and ideas. Seminars will be based on discussion of students' written work (formative assessment for sections of portfolio).

The learning and teaching strategies will be chosen to underpin the graduate skills associated with this module. Feedback on graduate skills not assessed formally will be given in tutorials and seminars.

### **Assessment:**

1 x 5000 word portfolio: 100% [Learning outcomes 1), 2), 3) & 4)]

The portfolio will provide structured evidence of students' progression in relation to learning outcomes and graduate skills. It will involve a degree of formative assessment, as students are required to submit sections of work (seminar papers which observe academic conventions) for review by peers and their tutor in seminars.<sup>58</sup> Such formative

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<sup>58</sup> CCCU, *Assessment Handbook: Enhancing Practice*, (2005) 2.9.

work, together with students' reflection on feedback, and reflections on relevant personal development, will form the basis for work submitted for summative assessment.

It is anticipated that appropriate sections of work for this portfolio may be used to support and enhance students' completion of PDPs.

### **Illustrative Question for Assessment:**

#### *Formative work:*

Individually, write a 1,000 word reflective piece entitled, 'What is the most personally transforming text I have read on this course, and why?' In small groups, peer review each others' work, and produce a portfolio record of the review process (this may include the use of small group forums in a VLE). As a group, select one piece of work for review by the tutor, along with a short note explaining the reasons for its selection. Individually, write a short reflective log on feedback from the tutor.

#### *Summative work:*

Select the best short pieces you have produced for this module, up to a total of 3,000 words. Write a 2,000 word essay that refers to these pieces and the process of formative work entitled, 'Why and How should Religion be studied in a University Context?' Assemble your work into a portfolio, including relevant selections from the formative process as appendices.

### **Illustrative Bibliography:**

Arcilla, R.V. (1995) *For the Love of Perfection: Richard Rorty and Liberal Education*. New York & London: Routledge.

Arnold, M. (1994) *Culture and Anarchy*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press.

Arthur J., Walters H., Gaine S. (1999) *Earthen Vessels: The Thomistic Tradition in Education*. Leominster: Gracewing.

Carr W., ed. (2005) *The Routledge Falmer Reader in Philosophy of Education*. London & New York: Routledge.

D'Costa, G (2005) *Theology in the Public Square: Church, Academy and Nation*. Oxford: Blackwell.

- Eagleton, T (2003) *After Theory*. London: Penguin.
- Frei, H.W. (1992) *Types of Christian Theology*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press.
- Heaney, S. (1995) *The Redress of Poetry*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Hill, G. (2003) *Style and Faith*. Counterpoint Press.
- Hughes, T. (1995) *Winter Pollen*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Ker, I. (1990) John Henry Newman. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lash, N. (1979) *Theology on Dover Beach*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd.
- Newman, J.H. (1996) *The Idea of a University*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press.
- Pieper, J. (1998) *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*. South Bend, Indiana: St Augustine's Press.
- Pieper, J. (2001) *Scholasticism*. South Bend, Indiana: St Augustine's Press.
- Rorty, R. (1982) 'Hermeneutics, General Studies, and Teaching', *Synergos* 2 Fall, pp. 1-15.
- Turner, D. (2002) *How to Be an Atheist*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Warne, R.R. (1998) '(En)gendering Religious Studies', *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses*, 27 pp. 427-36.
- Zack, N. ed. (2000) *Women of Color and Philosophy*. Oxford: Blackwell.

**Module Title:** Individual Study

**Module Code:** MREMD3DSS

**Level:** HE 3

**Credit Rating:** 40 Credits

**Duration:** 400 hours of student learning time

**Teaching Hours:** 15

**Academic Responsibility:** Ralph Norman (appropriate tutors to be assigned)

### **Module Aims:**

This module aims to enable the student, under the guidance of a tutor, to undertake an extended piece of work based on his or her own research. Further, this module aims to foster academic literacy through engagement in academic discourses, challenging conventional thinking and presenting new perspectives.<sup>59</sup>

### **Intended Learning Outcomes:**

By the end of the course, students should be able to demonstrate:

- 1) A detailed, critical, and sophisticated knowledge of the topic of their individual study;
- 2) A detailed knowledge of and critical engagement with relevant primary and secondary sources from both classical and contemporary scholarship, relevant to the questions studied;
- 3) An ability to choose, design and pursue a topic based on individual study;
- 4) Take initiative and personal responsibility for their own independent work and its contribution to their professional and personal development.<sup>60</sup>

### **Indicative Module Content:**

Involving independent research and the writing of a 8000 word dissertation under the direction of a supervising tutor, this module enables students to work for an extended period on a single writing project of their own devising (subject to tutor's approval). The module fosters students in the research, organizational, scholarly, and writing skills of graduate researchers in the field.

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<sup>59</sup> CCCUC, *Policy on Graduate Skills*, (2006) 9c.

<sup>60</sup> QAA , *Benchmark Statement for Theology and Religious Studies*, (2000) 1.5.

## **Learning and Teaching Strategies:**

Individual tutorials with assigned tutor, plus group seminars on research skills.

Students will be given an introduction to the individual study during the course option sessions of Level 2. By the end of Level 2 students will have to produce a proposal for their Individual Study, after which they will be assigned an individual tutor. Each student will have the equivalent of 5 hours tutorial time throughout the duration of the study, the first of which will be before the end of the summer term (in year 2) to agree an initial plan of work and reading. Apart from individual tutorials, students will also receive four sessions of research skills training to equip them for this piece of work.

Additional module content will depend on the topic chosen, but the 10 hours of teaching may consist of seminars on the following indicative issues: an introduction to the general aims and learning outcomes of the individual study; guidance with the creation and development of a bibliographical essay; development of a thesis or argument; review of draft outline and draft chapters; critical comments on a first draft. In this way, every student who writes an individual study will be guided in the same formal structures and requirements, whilst being free to develop their own subject matter in a topic consonant with their pathway.

## **Assessment:**

8000 word dissertation: 80% [Learning outcomes 1), 2), 3)]

2000 word portfolio: 20% [Learning outcomes 3), 4)]

The portfolio will provide structured evidence of students' progression in relation to learning outcomes and graduate skills. It will involve a degree of formative and diagnostic work (for instance, short bibliographical essays), as students are required to submit sections of work for review by their tutor. Such formative work, together with the students' reflections on relevant professional and personal development, will form the basis for work submitted as summative assessment.

It is anticipated that appropriate sections of work for this portfo-

lio may be used to support and enhance students' completion of PDPs.

### **Illustrative Bibliography:**

Although this will be specific to each Individual Study, general research skills work will be consulted.

- Allison, B et al. (1996) *Research Skills for Students*. London: Kogan Page.
- Berry, R (2000) *The Research Project: How to Write It*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Blaxtor, L. et al. (1998) *How to Research*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Giltrow, J. (1990) Academic Writing: How to Read and Write Scholarly Prose. Broadview Press.
- Harmon, C. ed. (1996) *Using the Internet: Online Services and CD-ROMs for Writing Research Papers and Term Papers*. Neal-Schuman.
- Mills, P. (1996) *Writing in Action*. Routledge.
- Preece, R.A. (1994) *Starting Research: An Introduction to Academic Research and Dissertation Writing*. Pinter.
- Turabian, K.L. (1982) *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses and Dissertations*. Heinemann.
- Turley, R.M. (2000) *Writing Essays: A Guide for Students in English and the Humanities*. Routledge.
- Watson, G. (1987) *Writing a Thesis: A Guide to Long Essays and Dissertations*. Longman.







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