

How do we teach RE?

'Pedagogy, which can roughly mean the process by which the child is led to learning, is a complex set of forces acting on every teacher, whether they know it or not' (Chater 2013). I found this quote very powerful as I considered the different pedagogical approaches used within RE and the impact that these have on both the teacher and pupil.

If we consider pedagogical approaches to be simply the way in which we deliver learning then we divorce from these approaches the need for clarity and understanding about the reasons for choosing a particular approach; the attendant discourse. It is crucial to understand the reasoning behind approaches used, the desired effect and to have complete clarity on how the chosen approach enhances the delivery of curriculum content.

When I deliver ITT sessions to Primary trainee teachers I always begin with the same activity. I ask the students to reflect upon their experience of RE; teaching RE, being taught RE, external factors that contribute to their feelings and understandings of RE etc. What I aim for the students to do here is to think about, and consider, their inner perspectives and feelings because, whether aware of it or not, this will have an impact upon the teaching of RE and the quality of RE that pupils receive. This is true of any subject and something that will influence pedagogy.

Another factor that can have a substantial impact upon the way in which RE is taught, and the pedagogical approaches that are included, is the understanding of the aim and purposes of RE. Again, at the beginning of each session that I lead (in whatever the context is) I ask practitioners to devise a sentence or two to explain what the aim and purpose of teaching RE is; it can be extremely interesting when discussing these to see how diverse these their ideas and opinions can be. This also needs to be considered as, if the aim and purpose of RE is not clear amongst teachers who are delivering it, then it won't be clear to the pupils to whom it is being taught.

Two pedagogical methods that I will focus on here are two interpretive approaches: Phenomenology and the Interpretive Ethnographic. This is not to say that I view these approaches to be the most important but simply that they have particular strengths and weaknesses that I find integral within RE.

When researching the Phenomenology approach clear areas of strength and weakness were apparent. If we look at this approach in its simplest terms, we are analysing a method that is, at best, giving an experience of learning about religion a restricted, limited margin whilst also providing an approach that can be seen as misrepresentative and contradictory to its intended objectivity.

It is crucial when applying this pedagogical approach that teachers have a deep understanding as to why they are applying it and the intended outcomes.

This approach enables pupils to look at a Religious Education in an objective way without judgement or or personal viewpoint. In his works Ninian Smart discusses how the study of religion should serve a cause that is non-ideological. He also states that 'the study of religion must attempt to be objectively outlined in a warm way...that serves the insider as well as the outsider' (Smart, 1973).

It is clear here that the benefits of this approach lie in the objectivity; studying religion in order to gain facts with no pre-determined prejudice or stereotyping as the awareness of how personal perception can distort learning is already considered. However, the weakness of this approach lies in the idea of studying religion in a 'warm way'. By doing this the practitioner should consider if this approach is completely objective or if, as stated, to study religion in a 'warm way' is to indeed automatically begin to facilitate distorted views that will ultimately 'fit into' Western ideas and values.

Another weakness of the Phenomenological approach is that it assumes that the way in which one religion or worldview can be studied can also be applied in the same way to others; I have found this not to be the case. I would not approach learning about Christianity in the same way as approaching learning about Hinduism. It cannot be assumed that the categories and foci used to approach one religion will fit another.

The second approach that I considered was the Interpretive Ethnographic approach based on anthropology within religions.

Lila Abu-Lughod asks 'How are we to deal with difference without accepting the passivity implied by the cultural relativism for which anthropologists are justly famous- a relativism that says it's their culture and it's not my business to judge or interfere, only to try to understand' (Lila Abu-Lughod 2012).

This approach focusses on the ability to report upon culture and social structure within religion. It is a way of looking into how religion can have an impact upon culture and social systems but this is assuming that all people within a religion believe and act in the same way. Does this approach get to the heart of diversity within religion and offer the space for critical enquiry and reflection? Religion is complex and should be explored as such.

The weaknesses with the ethnographic approach are just this- when is it time to critically reflect upon a religion or worldview?

When using this approach practitioners are encouraging emphasis upon the factual. It is another approach in which objectivity is encouraged and information is sought. However, when reporting on the factual are we digging deeper?

Clive Erricker states that '...unlike ethnographic studies of different localized cultures, the study of religions is a study of persuasive systems of thought immersed in and influential within a global context.' (Erricker, C 2013)

I wonder if, when using this approach, is it possible to be completely objective when you report or if, unintentionally, Westernised values and morals do play a part in how something is viewed. Can this approach be successfully applied to religious practice as it is with cultural living? It can be difficult to view religion solely in the context of cultural living. When we do this we pose a danger of skimming, or completely missing, religious ideologies and how these have played a part in the way in which diverse cultures have been, and are being, shaped.

My question would be- Is there ever a completely objective viewpoint where all factors are thoroughly considered?

Both of these approaches provide a strong basis to enable pupils to learn about different religions and worldviews in a way that opens up many different opportunities. There are many strengths to both approaches which must be equally weighed against the weaknesses.

When choosing pedagogical approaches within RE there are some essential points for consideration:

- The pupils and their needs,
- The aim and purpose of what you are teaching; what do you want the pupils to know/understand/explore
- Which approach is going to enhance learning and provide a greater level of depth to subject knowledge?
- How will this approach have an impact upon learning and the pupil 'experience'?
- Is the purpose clear so that we are able to judge the effectiveness of the approach?
- Are we ensuring integrity within the subject?

Only when we are clear about the purpose, aims and intended outcomes can we incorporate meaningful pedagogical approaches into practice.