

The Face to Faith Project: grasping the 'nettle' of religion

Ian Jamison

The role that religion in general, religious education in particular, can play in creating a just, equitable, society, open to both diversity and new learning has begun to occupy the minds of an increasing number of people worldwide. Ian Jamison writes about the early stages of one global schools project which has been made possible by advances in information technology.

Introduction

The 'Face to Faith' Programme is a global educational programme for secondary school students, run by the Tony Blair Faith Foundation. As the name of the project suggests, it is based upon direct encounters between groups of young people from around the world, and is focused upon ideas of identity and belief.

Using videoconferencing technology, groups of students are given the opportunity to dialogue with their peers, thus allowing them a direct vision into one another's worlds and experiences, beliefs and values (removing the all-too-frequently distorting lens of the media), and building relationships between young people of different cultures and faiths. Currently offered as a free programme in 12 countries (Australia, Pakistan, India, Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, Lebanon, Palestinian Territories, Jordan, UK, USA and Canada), Face to Faith is developing rapidly, and offers some exciting possibilities for RE teachers in the UK.

A learner-centred, issues-based approach

While the videoconferences may be the 'point of the arrow', they are only a small part of the programme: it would be pointless just to provide young people with that opportunity, without giving them tools to optimise their experience. Therefore, students are prepared for the videoconference experience by a programme of engaging and exciting lessons which schools are encouraged to use.

Currently, we offer one skills-based introductory module followed by three that are issues based. Focusing as it does upon developing the skills to enable meaningful dialogue, the first of these modules is key. Subsequent modules focus upon major world issues approached through

the perspectives of faith. Each of these issues modules also encourages students to get involved, in a very practical way, in meeting the challenges of those issues. In order to enable this to happen in a variety of schools we have produced a rich and varied set of resources and lesson plans. These are flexible in that they can be adapted to suit any particular cultural or academic setting and can even be used to support the project component of the Global Perspectives IGCSE offered in 140 countries by Cambridge Assessment.

Schools use this material in a variety of ways: some have imported it wholeheartedly into their curriculum whilst others are experimenting with slower introductions, perhaps just using one module to begin with. Some schools run this course as an after-school club, others as an elective course. There is no 'right way' of doing it, and no 'right speed' to get it going. We do appreciate that taking on board a new course, particularly in this subject area, can be a challenge in itself. This is not an attempt to export, in a colonialist style, a UK model of religious education, but one that has been, and continues to be, enriched by our conversations with our teacher-partners around the world.

The central methodological approach is one of building dialogical relationships which is, of course, difficult enough in a class within one educational culture, sharing one language. Within Face to Faith we are operating within a wide range of educational cultures, from those that are student-centred to those that are extremely traditional and didactic. Indeed, each school seems to have its own starting point in preparing students for dialogue. Everyone is somewhere along the journey and the challenge lies in helping everyone to progress.

Developing the skills of dialogue

We use a three-stage model to help empower students (and teachers) with the skills of dialogue. The foundation is the use of Cooperative Learning techniques which encourage students to get involved in discussion in a safe and supportive manner (and give them practice at sharing ideas, as well as building their confidence).

Upon this foundation, the second layer is built of some quite explicit work concentrating upon building dialogue (much of which is taken not from an educational setting but from the methodologies of interfaith dialogue). This encourages students to reflect more deeply upon both what they say and the way in which they say it. So, for example, we encourage students in discussion to use 'I' language all the time, to remember that they are speaking for themselves, rather than seeking to represent a community. One outcome of this is that there are sometimes a great many different narratives within an encounter, but it does help us to move away from the inevitable homogenisation that occurs when a limited range of resources is used to investigate a religious tradition. It also enables an authentic representation of diversity. So, we emphasise that it is preferable for students to say 'as a Christian/Muslim/Hindu/Atheist, I think/believe that . . .' While the picture that emerges from this may not have all the crystal-clear borderlines that one might get from other teaching resources, it is much more representative of the *fuzziness* of practice and belief out in the field. It also enables a full range of students to be able to express themselves: not merely those who feel themselves to be 'fully' members of a faith community, but also those who repudiate such a position, and those who are just not sure.

Through ongoing practice of these techniques, eventually students will be able to reach the third stage of participating in dialogue naturally. Needless to say, this is a complex business; some students are already at the third stage at the beginning! All of which will, to a great extent, be familiar to UK-based teachers of RE, but for many of the teachers and students involved with the project, this is the greatest challenge. Beyond this, all those philosophical debates about questions like 'What constitutes faith?' 'What is a religion?' and 'Where does religion end and culture begin?' become substantially less abstract, as one has to work with such a broad range of people, with such broad understandings of the (admittedly rather slippery) terminology.

Assessment and evaluation

As one might expect from a programme that is rooted so heavily in a student-centred approach, there are regular opportunities for self- and peer-assessment built into the teaching materials, along with guidance on successful methodologies to support this, but this is not merely for students. We are constantly striving to improve the materials that we offer, responding to the varied challenges of, and feedback from, different countries. In addition, Professor Robert Jackson and a team of researchers from the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit at Warwick University are carrying out an independent evaluation of Face to Faith.

Philosophical and curriculum challenges

In addition to the challenges raised by the variety of classroom practice, the vast majority of education systems that we are currently dealing with do not have RE (or indeed, anything that even looks much like RE). Many countries start from the point of view that there is a perceived tension inherent in the relationship between religious faith and education and that the easiest way of solving this is to adhere rigorously to secular principles in education. This is accompanied by an assumption that religion is an entirely private, and frequently divisive, matter that should be entirely left outside the classroom. When one considers the abuse of privileged positions in education by some religious communities in the past, this attitude is hardly surprising. Nobody wants to see young people being brainwashed or forced into any particular faith or ideology, and this rejection of religious faith as a legitimate topic of learning or discussion is one way to approach this.

In many of these countries, however, there is a growing recognition that ignoring the question of religious faith is not the best answer, in that it tends to produce individuals who are not only ignorant about religious faith (whether that of their own culture or others), but who also lack the specialised language or understandings which would enable them to engage with people of faith in the future. In the absence of this, their opinions will be formed by the vagaries of the media, or by extremist groups.

There are currently many excellent international educational projects which skirt round similar ideas – cultural exchanges, rights or morality-based education, citizenship of various kinds – but most of these avoid grasping the 'nettle

of religion'. This is, of course, precisely the difficult area that Face to Faith embraces. This is something that is acknowledged on the ground by a great many of the people (teachers, principals, ministries of education) who have chosen to get involved in the project. They have recognised that, as so many of the difficulties that arise in the world are related to issues of faith and identity, a programme that explicitly deals with such issues is vitally important. This is not to say that this programme has been accepted wholeheartedly in every country, but it has been enormously encouraging to meet the early adopters whose enthusiasm will help it to progress.

While most of the 24 UK schools currently working with the programme are doing so in the context of RE, Face to Faith has a great deal to offer students and schools in other areas too. It ties in closely with the Citizenship requirements of the National Curriculum – particularly with the emphasis upon global citizenship, and the reflective and discursive elements also have an enormous amount to contribute to the social and emotional aspects of learning (SEAL). The programme will also help schools to engage with the global and religious requirements of the community cohesion agenda. In terms of the explicit acquisition and practice of dialogical skills, there is great potential for helping schools with delivering the National Curriculum Personal, Learning and Thinking Skills, or with other skills-based approaches, such as the 'Opening Minds' curriculum run by the RSA (see <http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/ntrp/lib/pdf/boyle.pdf>).

Teacher engagement and support

Taking up this programme is obviously asking a great deal of any teacher. Most are moving well outside their traditional comfort zones, both in terms of what they are teaching and the way in which they are teaching it. The approach that we are encouraging inevitably leads to increasing democratisation of the classroom, as well as requiring teachers to move away from their traditional role as experts into one that emphasises their role as facilitators of students' learning.

The Foundation works hard to support teachers in a number of ways; through providing in-country workshops, through continued e-support (including videoconferences just for teachers), and through the work of local co-ordinators and lead schools in each country. Additionally, we provide an online community (through our Partners at Rafi.ki, a large online social network

of schools that spans over 100 countries) where students and teachers involved with the project can communicate in a safe and moderated environment, continue their conversations after the videoconference, share and celebrate their good practice, and find additional resources and stimulus material to enrich the programme.

Although the project is still comparatively new, we have already had some very powerful feedback from teachers and students, demonstrating great enthusiasm, particularly for participation in the videoconferences, and increasingly for the online community. Our experience of working with the first tranche of teachers around the world has been hugely stimulating and there has been enormous enthusiasm evident in all the project workshops; as one teacher wrote, 'There is a real buzz in school about Face to Faith'. There is a great thirst in schools all over the world for this kind of dialogue; for the pedagogical methods to build the skills to create it; and for the opportunities to embed and continue it, so that students are able to overcome the barriers of ignorance, prejudice and suspicion that have blighted the relationships of previous generations.

The teachers with whom we have worked so far are, like so many of their colleagues around the world, willing to embrace new ideas and approaches that will make the learning in their classrooms more effective, and have taken up Face to Faith in that spirit. As one of our Australian colleagues said, 'We are most impressed, and can really see the benefits for our children'.

We intend over the next year to widen the number of schools in our existing countries, as well as increasing our geographical reach. It is common knowledge that religious faith can be used to cause problems in the world, but there is also a desire to see examples of the ways that faith can be used to bring the world together, and to move towards addressing those problems. Face to Faith is one step towards that goal.

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UK schools that are interested in getting involved with the programme should contact the project manager, Dr Leila Walker (leila.walker@tonyblairfaithfoundation.org).