

## The Nature of Truth

**Hardenhuish School, Chippenham: Andrew Midwinter**

### Purpose

- To develop students' understanding of the nature of truth: that religion is a unique mode of thought with its own forms of verification;
- To demonstrate how beliefs, as well as facts, can have a major influence on behaviour;
- To demonstrate that there are different types of truth.

### Main emphasis

The main emphasis of this work was to:

- look at the way in which truth and facts are not necessarily the same thing
- show the extent to which beliefs influence behaviour and character
- help students develop their powers of judgement when considering different sorts of evidence, argument and opinion relating to 'truth claims'.

The key question for students to investigate was:

- 'The world, its people and their history are very complex: where is truth to be found, and who is telling it?'

### School profile

Total number of learners	1,545
Age range	11-18
Specialist status	Maths and ICT Specialist School
Level 5 and above in key stage 3 tests (2006)	85%
Five A*-C at GCSE (2007)	59%
Special educational needs	tbc

Hardenhuish is a large comprehensive school in the market town of Chippenham, Wiltshire. The school is one of three state schools which serve the town and its hinterland. The school services families from a wide range of economic backgrounds. In this sense the school is truly comprehensive. The school sends students regularly to Oxbridge, while some leave with few formal qualifications. There are very few students from minority ethnic backgrounds.

In the last Ofsted report the school was classified as 'good with some outstanding features'. The quality of teaching was identified as 'one of the school's strengths'.

## **Question 1: What were we trying to achieve?**

### **The starting point: Identifying the priorities for development What were our learners like at the start?**

At the core of many misperceptions of religion is a misunderstanding about the nature of truth. This can colour a student's attitudes towards the study of religion. For many students, there is a perception that while some subjects deal in 'facts', and therefore appear to be about the 'real world', RE is all about beliefs which cannot be proven, and therefore appears to be about something essentially 'unreal' and even 'fictional'. Conversely, unless challenged, students can treat opinion and belief from some sources as if they are facts.

The purpose of this course is to challenge students to think about the nature of truth and realise that:

- much of what we hear or read is people's interpretation of events;
- beliefs influence much of what we do and think;
- there is a need to develop their powers of judgement so that not only can they distinguish between fact and opinion, but also tell how reliable a particular source may be.

In practice this means challenging the notion that religion and people who are religious may be dismissed as irrational and irrelevant in a world so powerfully influenced by science and technology. It means looking at the nature of truth so that students understand where the different claims to truth made by science and religion may or may not conflict.

By the end of the course students should be able to explain why a comment such as, 'I don't believe in religion, I believe in the Big Bang', may be based on a particular understanding of what 'religion' and 'science' are, and what their claims to truth may be.

Clearly, this is a complex and challenging objective. In order to achieve development in students' understanding of the nature of truth, the RE, History and Geography departments decided to work together to explore the subject from their own perspectives.

## **What differences did we want to see in your learners?**

### **Main priorities for our curriculum development:**

**Knowledge, understanding and skills:** We wanted to students to know the meaning of such concepts as; fact, belief, evidence, proof, opinion, prejudice and to show their understanding through investigation and application to the task of solving the key question: 'The world, its people and their history are very complex: where is truth to be found, and who is telling it?' We wanted to develop their analytical and evaluative skills. This was to be a course where learning was not imposed, but was drawn out of the learner. The students had to learn to work in teams, with each member of the team taking responsibility for their own part. They had to reflect on the goals they had set and continually to assess what they had done and were they making the best use of their time. They had to listen and empathise with the views or opinions of others.

**Attitudes and behaviour:** We wanted to overcome in students a knee jerk rejection of religions and religious ideas; to see the religious world perspective as one way of viewing the

world (and not an inferior way), with its own language and forms of verification. Of course, this did not mean that we wanted students to become religious themselves, but to enter into the study of religion with a greater openness and sense of enquiry.

The RE focus for students' learning was therefore twofold: 'beliefs, teachings and sources' (attainment target 1) and 'questions of meaning, purpose and truth' (attainment target 2). We would measure students' progress in terms of the depth of their thinking and application in these concept areas.

## **Question 2 How did we organise learning to achieve our aims?**

### **How did we set about making a change?**

To begin with we had to choose which year to focus on. We chose year 9, because developmentally they were able to cope with the abstract ideas being studied. We also thought that such a course would be an excellent preparation for GCSE.

We knew that the new secondary curriculum, with its emphasis on concepts, rather than content, and the encouragement to provide a holistic experience for students would provide the medium to make the necessary changes to our programmes of study. In order to achieve our goals we needed to work collaboratively with other departments and faculties, so that they could examine the same concept from the perspective of their own disciplines.

The History and Geography departments were particularly interested. History chose to look at the extent to which history is an interpretation of evidence and that 'those who win the war write the history books'. Geography wanted to harness the topical interest in the Al Gore film 'The Inconvenient Truth', and how geographers reach different conclusions about the same data. There were other opportunities to make connections with skills exercised in other curriculum areas such as emotive writing in English and investigating ways of establishing truth in science.

In RE we began the year 9 course with the question, 'What is religion?' Students began by offering their own suggestions. Most focused on beliefs or believing in God. After some discussion the students themselves concluded that these definitions were inadequate. The next step was to find a definition of religion that all students could accept. Students were invited to think of questions they were unable to answer and to write them on pieces of card. Some examples were provided and the students were invited to think of things from a wide range of possibilities. They were then asked to sort these into different 'types'. Students categorised the questions mostly into subjects, but there was a definite list which they described as 'religious questions we cannot answer' (e.g. Is there a God? What happens to me when I die?). Students were then put into mixed-ability groups and asked to discuss an individual question and report back to the rest of the group. In the plenary students were asked if there was anything wrong with what they were asked to do. Discussion centred on the phrase 'unable to answer', which of course they had just set about answering! Students quickly got the point: although these are questions we cannot provide provable answers for, people do still answer them every day. For many people, it is the answers they give to these questions which make up their religion.

A card sort exercise was used to help students form their own definitions for the key concepts of fact and belief. Students had to sort various statements and decide how the statements could be categorised, how they were different from each other (definition) and in groups write

further examples of 'facts' and 'beliefs'. They soon realised that this is not so easy. This investigative and developmental approach proved to be very compelling for students. They were not given answers. Instead, they were posed questions and had to come to the answers themselves. They were made to think and question. Through discussion ideas would be scrutinised and challenged.

Because we knew the outline of the course they were following in history we could draw in examples from their course to firm up points we were making. They were making distinctions between verifiable 'facts' in history and central historical interpretations. For example, we know the second world war physically started in 1939, but historians do not all agree about the point at which war became 'inevitable'. As such, historical truth is very much dependent upon evidence, interpretation and judgement.

Students then thought about all the beliefs which influenced them in decisions they made during the day. They began to realise that their decisions were influenced as much by their beliefs as by facts. They then moved on to look at membership of various groups (vegetarians, Labour party, Christians, supporters of football teams etc) and how membership and consequentially action may be determined by beliefs.

Students then examined different types of belief. To begin with we investigated the nature of prejudice. Not in a racial sense but the philosophical concept. We decided we had to show the students that all of us are capable of making prejudicial judgements. Without giving them a lesson objective or outcome we told them that they were going to take part in an experiment. They sat in groups and were given a set of pictures. They were then asked to choose people in the group for various different scenarios ('Who would you be willing to tell a secret to....because...'). They were then asked to discuss their choices as a group and come to a common agreement, which was then presented to the rest of the group. Students kept a record of justifications for the choices.

The plenary developed students' thinking further. Through discussion they discussed the reasons for their judgements. Did they think their judgements were fair? Did any one say they could not do the exercise? Why? Or why not? The activity was made even more poignant because unfamiliar pictures were placed in the packs of infamous criminals e.g. Myra Hindley, Fred West). We then discussed a common definition for the term prejudice and the students thought of examples. These ranged from the obvious (such as race and sex discrimination) but also included judgements formed about things such as music and food.

We then moved on to the nature of evidence and proof within beliefs. An investigation was set up to look into evidence for reincarnation; namely déjà vu and hypnotic regression. Bloom's developmental taxonomy was used to provide a framework for the investigation. Students were put into small groups to look at individual cases and had to produce a PowerPoint presentation which would be given to the rest of the class. Each presentation had to conclude with the group's findings to the key question: *where is truth to be found, and who is telling it?* Some students answered the question simply in terms of the reincarnation claims; others, with encouragement, went on to make broader conclusions about reliable sources of evidence and different sorts of 'truth'.

In the plenary fundamental questions were asked about the conclusions they had reached and why after the investigation different students came to different conclusions - even within the same groups!

In the final part of the course we set up a number of investigations in which the students were given stimulus material and had to prepare for a presentation concerning sources of truth. One group was given a short story about a boy who entered into a debate with his friends about how he knows that his mother loves him. Another was given 'The Parable of the Freedom Fighter' by Basil Mitchell, which examines the nature of faith. The other groups looked at individual spiritual experiences. For example, one group investigated 'Near Death Experiences' and the effect these had on the believers, another the conversion of Yusuf Islam, and finally various religious experiences from John Bowker's 'Worlds of Faith'. To help students the lessons were punctuated with timeouts, in which students had to reflect on what they had achieved and what they still had to do.

This was the culmination of the course where students began to realise that personal experience influences all our lives and that some of the most important truths we hold are known to us through our experiences.

### **Question 3 How well have we achieved our aims?**

#### **What differences are evident? What impact have we made on our learners?**

The move away from a heavily content-based curriculum to the freedom offered by a concept and skills-based curriculum has provoked a lot more interest in the subject. This can be measured by those opting to continue with the subject to full GCSE level (up by 37%). The lessons have also sparked much more debate. In a recent Learning Review day students reported to their tutors that they enjoyed RE because it made them think. (Worryingly, a few students said they did not like RE for the same reason!).

The presentations for the final stage of the course were impressive. Students produced plays, monologues, some researched poems, but essentially all stayed focused on the concept of the nature of truth and brought in work they were undertaking from History and Geography. In the plenary sessions the students' questioning of each others' presentations was respectful, but very thorough.

We have recently been visited by a Christian band called 'The Collective' and not only were students more interested (and less dismissive) of what they had to say, but also the quality of the questions were more mature, sophisticated and probing.