

My NQT year in RE: reflections and observations of the headlights as seen through the eyes of the rabbit

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For most of us, our year as a newly qualified teacher (NQT) is a bitter-sweet time when our feet hardly seem to touch the ground. How good it is, then, to find an NQT – in the case of Richard Cooper – who has found the capacity not only to dodge the clichés but also to keep on reflecting on the nature of education and teaching.

Introduction

This article is about metaphors and clichés. Both seem to crop up often in RE teaching. In among this seemingly endless stream of (sometimes) useful metaphors, it was mentioned to me that the PGCE year would be the ‘hardest year of my teaching career’. I think this somehow was meant as a motivational tool so I was still delighted when, last year, I managed to gain qualified teacher status (QTS). Almost as soon as the certificate had been slotted into a plastic wallet, sticky-labelled with the date and placed in the relevant section of my teaching folder, a colleague of mine assured me that *now*, in my NQT year, ‘the real work begins’. Again, on some level, I think this was meant to prepare me for the year that has just gone. And, as I sit here, labelling printed copies of emails and duplicate lesson plans with notes referring to the ‘C’ standard that is evidenced, I cannot help but wonder if this ‘next year will be the hardest’ trick is some sort of inside joke, like the naïve young building-site apprentice being sent to the storesman to ask for a long weight. This article is a reflective interpretation of the view from the eyes of the NQT rabbit caught in the educational headlights.

Metaphors, similes and pedagogies

During a time of display-board transition this year, I read a piece in a very reputable publication about a comparison between RE and a tree in that ‘it reaches upwards for our highest hopes, downwards for our roots, and spreads sideways towards others’ (Gates 2011: 8). This simile seemed relevant enough to me to

influence one half of a classroom display-board and helped my continual reflection on what RE should be.

I would say that I have developed some idea of how I should approach the subject. That is not to say that I have arrived at a destination or am static. Rather, I think I understand the (early) stage of the evolutionary process I am currently at. I use the term ‘evolution’ in the sense that I think the subject mutates and adapts depending on what best suits its environment rather than pointing towards some end goal. When sitting down to plan a lesson or a scheme of work, I always try to consider not only the learning objectives and how I am going to assess pupil progress, but what my underlying pedagogical approach is. I strive to make my lessons adhere to what I consider to be the nature and the purpose of the subject. I can hear the voices of the likes of Clive and Jane Erricker and Rob Freathy ringing in my ears as I begin to describe *my* lessons and *my* approach. ‘This is not the right way to talk about it,’ they might say; ‘you should talk about the subject as it revolves around the child rather than the other way round.’ Perhaps the best approach to the subject *is* about a child-centred narrative, and to relinquish an element of regimented control does liberate the subject from the shackles of the teacher. Valid as this approach may be, at this early stage of my career it simply seems too scary. I would say that my current approach places me more as Copley’s gatekeeper or an Andrew Wright-style Socratic midwife. In other words, I think that the purpose that underpins my practice is to try to create and develop critically engaged pupils, leading them through a genuine exposure

to, and interaction with, religion. I see my job as to 'tease-out' the philosopher in every child and then to give him/her the tools and ability to introspect. Perhaps developing and shaping tools in a way that I deem appropriate does limit pupil introspection. In any case, I am still trying to work out what to do and how to do it in a practical sense. Sometimes I feel as if a lesson has gone well and that I have been consistent with my pedagogical outlook. Although, more often, I am left puzzled as to why all of the pupils leaving my classroom are not in either a deep state of reflection or engaging in open philosophical dialogue. Why are these pupils not as enthused about the subject as I am?

Managing my expectations is something that I am continually battling with. All of this represents the kind of inner dialogue that takes place when I am planning and delivering RE lessons. My actual approach on a lesson-by-lesson basis may occasionally adhere to this and, when it doesn't, I find comfort in such aphorisms as 'you can't win them all', 'take each day as it comes' and 'don't reinvent the wheel'.

Some unorthodox inspiration

In addition to all of the advice and literature on what an RE lesson should be like, I have drawn guidance from some unusual places, namely a comedian and – even more bizarrely – Ofsted. In 2003, Ofsted reported on the successful teaching of boys. It said that lessons should include 'A variety of activities, sprightly pace, materials that engage all pupils,' and that 'Boys tend to respond well to teachers who . . . use humour and reward good work' (Ofsted 2003: 3). At first glance, this may appear as if Ofsted is stating the obvious. However, as I work at an all-boys senior school, I felt comfort in the validation of the use of humour as an aid to learning if delivered in the right way. While there are certainly appropriate moments in RE for quiet reflection and for respectful discussion, there are also times when the light-heartedness and joviality of youth can be embraced as a means of enhancing learning. It has, of course, to be scaffolded suitably. In other words, a teacher should not start chasing a laugh as an end in itself. The message I have taken from it is that it is good to take your subject but not yourself too seriously.

I also think that I have been influenced by the work of the alternative comedian Stewart Lee who, in my opinion, is comedy's equivalent of an inspirational classroom teacher (quietly going about providing inspirational lessons to pupils

and reflecting very philosophically on what teaching is). In terms of the structure of stand-up comedy, Stewart Lee suggests that its success depends on both the *form* and the *content*. He is referring here to not only what jokes you tell, but how you tell them and the atmosphere that you want to create.

I have found that 'form and content' is a mantra I to hold on to when planning a lesson. The work of Stewart Lee has helped me realise that it is both the content of my lessons and the structural form that I need to consider. For example, a Year 8 Sikhism lesson on the formation of the Khalsa will have as its stimuli a class clips video, two pages from the textbook and a basic PowerPoint (content). I would like pupils to reflect not only on how it would have felt to be in the crowd on that day but also the lasting impact and significance for Sikhs today. To do this, I would like them to produce a script in pairs between themselves and a Sikh boy their age (if they are not Sikh) imagining that they have travelled back in time to that Vaisakhi celebration in 1699 (form). Though I am sure that this is just an articulation of what most RE teachers do anyway, I have found that explicitly addressing both the 'form and content' of lessons has had a positive impact on the quality of my teaching. In other words, the lessons generally align more tightly with (a) the learning objectives and (b) the way I want to teach. As long as the content is reliable, well-produced and varied, the lessons are generally successful.

The NQT view

So what is my view of education (religious and general) from the rather scary vantage point of an NQT? I hope that this article shows that, although I find the world of education intimidating and bewildering at times, my view is generally positive. Yes there is a lot of paperwork and yes there are increasing pressures weighing on teachers today, despite the allegedly lower status afforded to the profession. On occasion I have heard the utterance of a rhetorical question along the lines of, 'Why is my lesson only "Satisfactory" when I thought it met the criteria for "Good"?' Some sections of most staffrooms moan about the Government, some about 'those pesky kids', some about their senior leadership and some about having to work until 85 ('by the time I reach retirement, we will all be working until 85 anyway'). Compounding this are the unique issues affecting teachers of RE. Should RE be part of the E Bacc or is it better to avoid the inevitable ideological shift? Are GCSE

exams too easy? Do they address the real areas of RE in a non-offensive yet significant way? Is RE even going to be a subject in the future? But it has been my experience that attempting to deliver a lesson in a genuine, enthusiastic and enjoyable way usually elicits an appreciative response from pupils. It is a humbling feeling to have a pupil say that you have inspired them to take the Religious Studies A level, or simply that they really enjoyed your lesson.

The same colleague who told me how hard this year would be also suggested that teaching is all about savouring these small moments and using them for affirmation when things are crashing around you. I have had moments this year where I have wanted the ground to swallow me up. But I have also had moments that have given me a greater sense of satisfaction than anything I have ever done. So, in my own clichéd way, I have made it through the door into the fully qualified world of teaching. I am sure if I read this article in five years' time, I will cringe at my current reflections. However, if I had read it two

years ago, I think it would have reassured me that I am following the right path.

References

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'In relation to religions, it is not sufficient to about the history of religions, or about the outward phenomena of religions. Religion is not restricted to practices, artefacts, and buildings. It is also necessary to attempt to understand the meaning of religious language as used by religious believers, including expressions of their beliefs and values.'

Robert Jackson, Council of Europe Context Document, 2012

'Life is half spent before we know what it is.'

English saying recorded in 1651